

**Disciplinary writing: A case study of Hong Kong
undergraduates undertaking their writing tasks**

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, where English is used as the main medium of instruction in universities, the majority of undergraduates studying in various disciplines are local students whose first language is Chinese. Although there were many studies of second language (L2) writing in English, many of them were oriented towards product or process and were conducted in artificial settings. There have been relatively few situated studies of English L2 writing in higher education in the social contexts in which students undertake their writing tasks. This study seeks to address this primary question: How do nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake the assessed writing tasks of their disciplinary courses?

Case study was used to examine two NNES undergraduate students undertaking their assessed writing tasks in a Hong Kong university. Data were collected over a period of two years and from multiple sources: text-based interviews, participant diaries, and documents (texts produced by the participants, course documents and source materials). Inductive analysis was employed to make sense of the data. Specifically, data were organised, coded, categorised and integrated.

The results revealed that the processes through which the participants accomplished their disciplinary writing tasks were complex and influenced in various ways by the contexts in which the writing took place. Task specifications for the assigned tasks, mostly done in groups, were often not clearly stated. This gave rise to the employment of different strategies by students to represent the tasks, guess readers' expectations and interact with group mates to achieve their purposes. They also relied heavily on the Web as information sources to complete their tasks, which gave rise to problems such as textual borrowing. The thesis closes by exploring the pedagogical implications, which include the idea that English for Academic Purposes courses should move towards more discipline-specific to better help students cope with their disciplinary writing demands.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the problem

English has been widely used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education for many countries (Crystal, 2003:112). One of the reasons is that English has become “the medium of a great deal of the world’s knowledge” (Crystal, 2003:110). As Swales (2004) points out, English has been the pre-eminent language of research and publication, especially for research articles that aim at international forums. Since higher education is concerned with access to knowledge in various disciplines, English is often adopted in advanced courses as the medium to acquire the knowledge of that discipline. Another reason, according to Crystal (2003), is the presence of international students in many universities, which makes English as the best choice of a *lingua franca*. This means that many nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) students pursuing their studies in universities in many countries have to use their English L2 (second or foreign language) to learn and particularly to cope with the different writing demands in their disciplinary courses.

Findings from previous studies have indicated that NNES students in universities encountered different types and degrees of difficulty in coping with the writing demands in their disciplinary courses. For example, in their case study of four international students in their first year of studies at a US university, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) found that they experienced a range of difficulties in coping with writing demands in the disciplinary courses, from cognitive to social problems. Connor and Kramer’s (1995) study showed that NNES graduate students experienced difficulties in writing business case reports. Leki (1995) reported the strategies NNES students at a US university developed to cope with the writing demands they encountered in their disciplinary courses. In her longitudinal case study of the reading and writing strategies of an NNES undergraduate at a US university, Spack (1997) reported the “failures and struggles” (p.47) of the student participant in dealing with the reading and writing tasks in the

student's disciplinary courses. She also pointed out the inadequacies of English courses in helping the student cope with disciplinary writing: "she [the student] had extensive practice in paraphrasing and quoting course material in English 3 and 4 [English courses she took in her first year]...but in the second year those skills collapsed under the weight of confusion about how to write for PS 160 [a political science course]" (1997:50).

Such difficulties faced by NNES students in the US are also experienced by undergraduates in Hong Kong, where the present study was conducted. In a large-scale (involving around 5,000 undergraduates) investigation into the language problems experienced by local Cantonese-speaking students at a university in Hong Kong, Evans and Green (2007) found that these students experienced various degrees of difficulties in using English to study. Of all the different areas of difficulties, *academic writing* was found to be most difficult area for students. In another study of the perceptions of business lecturers about the language problems encountered by their Chinese students in five universities in Hong Kong, Jackson (2005) found that students "had generally weak language skills, especially writing" (p.299) and that these lecturers "had felt compelled to lower their standard of assessment..." (p.301).

1.2 Brief review of L2 writing studies

Because of the increasing number of NNES students pursuing their studies in universities in Britain, Australia, North America and other places of the world, research on L2 writing, especially in academic settings, has been growing rapidly ever since the 1980s when there was little published research on this area (Polio, 2003).

Published research on L2 writing thus far can be broadly divided into three main focuses: products, processes and social context. Research that mainly focuses on the written products (e.g., Allison, 1995; Connor, 1984; Engber, 1995; Ishikawa, 1995; Schneider & Connor, 1990) basically aimed at finding out the text features of L2 writers such as linguistic accuracy, syntactic complexity, lexical sophistication, metadiscourse features, and cohesion and coherence. Research that focuses on the writing processes

mainly enquired into the behavioural and cognitive aspects of writing as well as writers' strategies (e.g., Boshier, 1998; Hall, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Pennington & So, 1993; Raimes, 1985; Roca de Larios et al., 1999; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Zamel, 1982, 1983). Research that has a social context orientation investigates primarily how the writer or writing is shaped and influenced by the social context or vice versa. Examples of these studies are: Swales's (1990) study on structure of introductions in research articles; lexical verbs used in medical research reports (Williams, 1996); writing tasks or skills required in academic courses (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Horowitz, 1986; Zhu, 2004a); conceptual activities required in a particular disciplinary course (Currie, 1993); acquiring disciplinary literacy in English L2 (Riazi, 1997; Spack, 1997); students' writing in group projects across the curriculum (Leki, 2001); and disciplinary socialisation through writing (Casanave, 1995).

Silva (1993:668) pointed out more than a decade ago that at that time there existed "no coherent, comprehensive theory of L2 writing". This was in part due to "the newness of L2 writing as an area of inquiry" and the "unexamined assumption" (pp. 668-669) that L1 (first language) and L2 writing are basically the same. Increasingly, findings of L2 writing research have proven this assumption groundless. He argues that more research is needed "to better describe the unique nature of L2 writing" (p.669) from different sources or perspectives such as cognitive, social, cultural, linguistic and educational. Nowadays, researchers have acknowledged the uniqueness of L2 writing and its increasing importance as English has become a global language, especially in higher education. Because of its uniqueness, some researchers and scholars such as Atkinson (2005), Casanave (2002, 2004) and Prior (1998) have advocated situated studies of L2 writing; that is studies that are situated in particular settings and social contexts and grounded in the particular contexts which the participants inhabit (Atkinson, 2005).

In his situated study of academic writing tasks in graduate seminars, Prior (1995) discovered that the tasks were far more complex than he could imagine before the study. He found that "the task the professor assigned was not the same as the task the students understood...students representations of the assigned writing tasks drew on many sources

other than the professor's statements of those tasks..." (p.52). The sources students drew on form part of the social context in which students' learning and writing took place. In order to better "understand how a text comes into being", researchers need to look "broadly at contexts as well as closely at specific situated activity" (Prior, 2004:171-172). That is to say in order to better understand how students produce texts in response to given tasks in their disciplinary courses, there is a need to examine not only the written products or the writing processes but also the social contexts in which the writing takes place.

1.3 Challenges of L2 writing studies in natural settings

Situated studies of L2 writing mean that researchers have to conduct the studies in natural settings rather than artificial settings like many product and process-oriented studies often do (typically, participants are asked to complete given writing tasks within a given time in an English classroom or language laboratory; e.g., Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Wang & Wen, 2002). Due to the difficulties and time-consuming nature in data collection, relatively few studies have been conducted in the natural settings and the particular contexts which participants inhabit. One of the difficulties is finding and retaining participants. In Prior's (1998) study, which primarily investigates writing at advanced levels of disciplinary enculturation and the special situation of international students in a university writing context, he approached around 60 students to find participants; only four expressed interest even if students were paid to participate in the study. In the end only one student participated fully in his study.

Another challenge is the amount of time spent on data collection. Situated studies often involve prolonged engagement with participants; this can be from five months to three years. Spack's (1997) study into a student's experience in content courses took her three years to interview one NNES student, observe the student's classes, interview the student's professors and examine the student's writing. In her longitudinal case studies, Leki (2007) traced her NNES student participants' academic literacy development for three years until they graduated from university. In a study of a group of first year sociology doctoral students learning to write in their discipline, Casanave (1995) spent 18

months collecting the data needed. Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) followed four NNES postgraduate students for nine months to uncover the problems they encountered in the process of adapting to the requirements of discipline-specific written discourses during their first year of studies in the US. Riazi (1997) spent five months collecting data from four NNES doctoral students in Canada to find out their interpretations of writing tasks and composing strategies.

While there are challenges in undertaking situated studies of L2 writing, more such studies are needed in order to enrich our understanding of how students write in response to given tasks in their disciplines.

1.4 Significance of the study

Most situated studies of L2 writing in higher education published in journals or books were conducted in universities in North America (e.g., Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Connor & Kramar, 1995; Currie, 1993; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Leki, 1995; Riazi, 1997). More situated studies in different linguistic and social contexts such as Hong Kong are badly needed precisely because of its social, cultural and linguistic uniqueness. In Hong Kong, where about 95% of the population are Chinese (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 2006), there are at present seven government-funded universities, all of which adopt English as the main medium of instruction and assessment (except for Chinese-related subjects). Although in practice some teachers may use English or Cantonese (the local vernacular) or both in classroom instruction depending on disciplines and linguistic background of both teachers and students, the assessed writing tasks for most disciplines are almost always in English (Jackson, 2005). This could have implications for local students' abilities to learn and particularly to cope with the writing demands in their disciplinary courses. As mentioned in section 1.1, studies from Evans and Green (2007) and Jackson (2005) revealed that academic writing was the most difficult area for undergraduate students in Hong Kong.

Before entering universities, Hong Kong students usually have completed six years primary and seven years secondary (including senior-secondary) education. Although Chinese has become the default medium of instruction for all schools after the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997 and, as a result, only a small number of primary and secondary schools are able to keep English as MOI, English has always been one of the core subjects for all schools. This means that first-year undergraduate students in Hong Kong would have been learning English as a subject for 13 years. Since the English they have learnt at schools is largely for examination and general purposes and they therefore may not be able to cope with the English needed for university study, most universities in Hong Kong require undergraduates to take one or several English courses usually in their first or second year. Such courses are generally referred to as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) although different universities may use different course titles.

The effectiveness of the writing component of such EAP courses in helping students cope with writing in their disciplinary courses was questioned by Leki and Carson (1997). In their study conducted in the US, they found that, among other things, there was a disparity between “what is valued in writing” for EAP writing classes and that valued in writing for disciplinary courses (1997:64). In another study of writing in business courses in a university in the US, Zhu (2004a) also found that the skills required for writing tasks in business courses are different from those taught in EAP courses. In my own experience of English language teaching in universities in Hong Kong, most EAP courses I have taught are for general academic purposes. My students often told me about their difficulties in undertaking the writing tasks in their disciplinary courses and that what they learnt in their EAP courses was largely not related to what they had to write in their disciplines. However, little is known regarding the extent to which the current EAP writing courses in Hong Kong universities are effective in helping students to cope with the writing demands in their disciplinary courses.

Although there has been a growing body of research on the writing of NNES students in higher education, there are still unmet needs in this area because of the increasing number of NNES students studying in various disciplines, especially the

business discipline in Hong Kong. Particularly, very few naturalistic studies have been published on how Hong Kong NNES business undergraduates accomplish their writing tasks in their disciplinary courses. Without adequate knowledge of how such groups of students undertake their disciplinary writing tasks, it would be difficult to understand their language needs. Needs analysis is, however, an essential part of designing EAP courses – as Prior (1995:47) points out, “a fundamental step in special-purpose language teaching and research is needs analysis”. The present study attempts to enhance the knowledge base for L2 disciplinary writing in Hong Kong universities by discovering how business undergraduates in Hong Kong accomplish their disciplinary writing tasks.

1.5 Purpose of the study and research questions

This study aims at developing a more complete account of the processes through which NNES business undergraduates in Hong Kong complete their assessed writing tasks in their disciplinary and social contexts. With this aim in mind, this study has the following *primary research question*: How do non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their assessed writing tasks? Since this study is situated in the contexts in which the writing takes place, it has to be conducted in the contexts in which the student participants normally live and study rather than in an artificial setting like other process studies did (see section 1.3). In order to develop a more complete account of students’ writing processes, this case study follows the participants through two years of their business study; moreover, it encompasses product, process and social contexts. There are five *specific research questions* to guide data collection and analysis:

1. What are the disciplinary, institutional and local contexts in which non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their writing tasks?
2. How do they interpret writing tasks?
3. What are the sources they use and how do they use such sources in producing their writing tasks?

4. Do they encounter any difficulties in their writing processes? What are those difficulties?

5. What strategies do they employ in accomplishing their writing tasks?

1.6 Overview of chapters

This study consists of seven chapters. In **chapter 1**, I have provided the background of the problem that leads to this study, the challenges of situated studies of L2 writing, the significance and the purpose of this study. In **chapter 2**, I attempt to review the development of L2 writing theories and research, based on which I construct a conceptual framework of this study. I also review and discuss the common approaches and methods used in L2 writing process research, based on which I devise the research method that best fits the purpose of the present study.

Chapter 3 presents the philosophical underpinning, research design and method of the study. It also describes the research site, the participants, methods of data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, and ethical issues. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe and discuss the results of this study. In **chapter 4**, I attempt to address research question 1 by describing the three layers of contexts in which the participants accomplished their writing tasks. In **chapter 5**, I describe and discuss (1) the writing processes through which the participants completed their writing tasks (addressing the primary research question), (2) how they interpreted their given tasks (research question 2), and (3) the sources they used and how they used them in producing their texts (research question 3).

In **chapter 6**, I portray and discuss the difficulties the two participants encountered in their writing processes and their coping strategies (research questions 4 and 5).

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter in which I summarise the main findings of this study, discuss the pedagogical implications and reflect on the limitations of the study followed by some suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Research on English as a second language writing is relatively new although the history of teaching English as a second language can be traced back as early as in 1945 when Charles Fries's oral approach was popular (see section 2.2.1). Krashen in 1984 pointed out that "studies of second language writing are sadly lacking" (p.41). At that time, few studies on L2 writing were published. However, the body of literature on L2 writing research has been growing ever since. Long and Richards (2003) attribute this phenomenon to the role of "English as the language of globalization and international communication" of which written English is the "predominant medium for much of this discourse" (p. xv). English as L2 writing skills do not only "play an increasingly important role today in the lives of professionals in almost every field and discipline" (Long & Richards, 2003: xv) but also in the academic world, notably in higher education (Swales, 2004). This has, in part, led to the exponential growth of research in L2 writing over the last decade and a half. Much of the research in the past two decades has primarily focused on either *product*, *process* or both. More recently, there has been a shift of focus to a more social/cultural orientation. This chapter examines relevant theories and research on L2 writing to provide the theoretical framework of the present research. It is organised into two parts: the first part reviews L2 writing theories and research; the second part examines those approaches and methods used in L2 writing research, based on which I derive a research design that best fits the purposes of the present study.

2.2 L2 writing theories and research

Different scholars categorise the development of L2 writing theories and pedagogical approaches somewhat differently. Traditionally, they are classified into four major approaches: *controlled composition*, *current-traditional rhetoric*, *the process approach* and *English for academic purposes (EAP)*, which are referred to as the "most

influential” approaches (Silva, 1990:12). Raimes (1996) refers to the four approaches to L2 writing instruction as four different foci: *form* (the rhetorical and linguistic features of the text), *writer* (the composing processes), *content* (as demanded by the readers) and *reader* (their expectations). Primarily, the *controlled composition* and *current-traditional rhetoric* approaches focus on the written product (the text) or the rhetorical and linguistic *form* of the text, whereas the *writer* approach focuses on the cognitive processes through which writers produce their texts. The *EAP* approach basically focuses on the expectations of *readers* in a particular academic discourse community and the rhetorical structure of a particular genre (generally covers ‘content’ and ‘reader’). For the purpose of this study, I divide the L2 writing theories and research into three broad orientations: **Product, Process and Social.**

2.2.1 Product orientation

Literature on the development of writing instruction often traces theories and practices back to 1945 when Charles Fries’s oral approach (often regarded as the pioneer of the audiolingual method) to teaching L2 writing was popular. Fries’s theories are that language is essentially speech with structural patterns and that learning to write is an exercise in conditioning the learners and helping them to form the necessary habit. He believed that “a person has learned a foreign language when he has... first mastered the sound system... and has, second, made the structural devices... matters of automatic habit” (1945: 3). It seems that his theories were not based on his own research but were generally derived from theories of structural linguistics and the work of the behaviourist psychologist B.F. Skinner. Based on these theories, writing instruction was primarily focused on grammatical accuracy using methods such as sentence and grammar drills, imitation of model passages, gap fillings and substitutions. Teachers essentially played the role of ‘quality controller’ controlling the ‘correctness’ of students writing and helping English L2 students to replace their ‘old’ L1 (first language) habits with ‘new’ L2 habits. This mode of teaching has developed into what has been widely known as “controlled composition”.

Controlled composition

The controlled composition approach, with its narrow focus on linguistic forms and ignoring other aspects of writing, attracted a number of criticisms from researchers, for example Erasmus (1960) and Briere (1966). They proposed the notion of “free composition” and “writer-originated discourse” to promote learners’ fluency in writing, which was rebuffed by others such as Pincas (1962: 85) who subscribed to the view of “scientific habit-forming teaching methods” and grammatical accuracy and usage correctness. Such scientific habit-forming and grammar-cum-usage teaching methods were popular in the 1960s (for example, Brooks, 1964; Lado, 1964; and Rivers, 1964) but are still used by many schools, for example, in China, especially in lower level writing classes. These methods certainly serve the purposes of curricula that emphasise grammatical accuracy and usage.

Current-traditional rhetoric

The debate between fluency (free writing) and accuracy (controlled writing) carried on for sometime until an approach called the “current-traditional rhetoric” started to emerge in the mid-sixties. This approach was widely recognised as an integration of the key principles of the current-traditional paradigm in L1 composition instruction and Kaplan’s theory of contrastive rhetoric (1966, 1967). According to Kaplan (1967), the rhetoric, defined as “the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns” (p.15), of each language is unique to that language and culture, and understanding such differences can help L2 students organise their writing at discourse level in such ways that are acceptable to native speakers. Thus, the major concern of current-traditional rhetoric approach was the *rhetorical form* of the written product. The emphasis was “on the *composed product* rather than the *composing process*; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage...and with style...” (Young, 1978:31, my emphases). It was translated into classroom practices as paragraphs structure of essays (introduction, body and conclusion), elements of paragraph (topic or thesis and support sentences) and text development (e.g. illustration; definition; exemplification, classification; description; cause and effect; comparison and contrast

etc.). The latter is sometimes referred to as text functions of written English in some textbooks (e.g. Jordan, 1990).

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric (CR) drew both critics and supporters. Critics such as Casanave questioned the validity of Kaplan's assumption that "cultural patterns inherent in the rhetorics of different languages cause L2 students to write in ways that are not native-like" (Casanave, 2004: 30). Her main argument is that "little research has been done (some of the original CR ideas are not testable) and partly because there is no strong theoretical base for CR, which has always been a *descriptive* project" (Casanave, 2004: 33, original emphasis). Hinds (1983) pointed out some of the flaws in methodology used in Kaplan's original CR research. He argued that to make the claim of culturally influenced rhetoric valid Kaplan should examine the rhetoric of the writers' first language instead of examining their essays written in English (as reported in Casanave, 2004). Mohan and Lo (1985: 520) asserted that Kaplan's evidence "from classical and modern Chinese prose does not support the view that there are gross differences between the organization of exposition in English". They also questioned the objectivity of Kaplan's method of data analysis: Kaplan only had "an informal discussion of four examples" (p.521) out of 110 essays he collected from Chinese students and only one of the essays was expository prose while the others were either narrative or description. Based on their research, Mohan and Lo (1985) argued that instead of Kaplan's claim of negative transfer of rhetorical pattern from Chinese to English, some of the rhetorical difficulties that Chinese L1 students experienced when writing in English were due to normal writing development problems.

Supporters of CR such as Connor helped to rectify some of the flaws of the original CR research by conducting research using comparative and contrastive text analysis. She analysed texts such as grant proposals prepared by English and Finnish scholars in their L1 (Connor, 2000); she described how students from different countries tackle the same written assignment such as case report in business management (Connor & Kramer, 1995). A more detailed review of this particular study is presented in the next section.

2.2.2 Process orientation

The focus on written products is understandable because it is the texts, be they essays or reports (in academic context), that are ultimately evaluated and graded. L2 writing teachers no doubt will try to help students improve their written products and the product-focused current-traditional rhetoric approach seems to offer some kind of solution. This is perhaps one of the reasons why it still influences many popular ESL writing textbooks (e.g. Jordan, 1990) and classroom practices today. However, teachers and researchers were getting more discontented with this product-dominated, form-focused approach and began to be more concerned with what L2 writers do when they write. One of the reasons was that they increasingly believed that before they know how to teach writing, they must first understand how students write. They started to look to L1 composition research for ideas. With little research on L2 writers and their writing processes in the sixties, Emig's (1971) L1 writing research, groundbreaking at that time, on composing processes of twelfth graders led to a shift of L2 writing research interest from product to process. In her research, she attempted to uncover the *mental processes* of the participants when they were writing using a method called *think-aloud protocols* (which was widely used in cognitive psychology). Since then, this method has become very popular in writing process research on both L1 and L2 writing. However, researchers gradually have discovered problems with this method, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In this section, I review some seminal studies in writing process, especially studies that are relevant to my own study.

Flower and Hayes cognitive process model

Employing mainly think-aloud protocols in their research, Flower and Hayes (1981) reveal that the writing process is a very complex cognitive activity and is not at all linear but recursive. Thus, writing processes are best seen as *cognitive processes*, through which writers attempt to respond to rhetorical problems such as writing an assignment. They developed a "cognitive process model" (1981) which depicts writing as consisting of three main interacting components with subcomponents within each main component. The three main components are: (1) the **task environment** (within which are the *rhetorical problems* of assignment topic, audience and exigency, plus the *text produced so*

far), (2) the writer's **long-term memory** (within which are *knowledge of the topic area*, *audience* and *writing plans*), and (3) the **writing processes** which are made up of *planning* (which includes the sub-processes of idea generating, organising and goal setting), *translating* (which involves turning ideas generated into words and texts), *reviewing* (which includes evaluating and revising the written work), and a *monitor* through which the writer can move back and forth among the processes.

Flower and Hayes' cognitive process model has been widely recognised as a well developed and sophisticated representation of the cognitive processes through which writers, be they L1 or L2, produce their written products. Their process model breaks away from the "traditional paradigm of stages" (1981: 367), which regards writing as linear sequence, and describes writing as a "dynamic system" (p.368) consisting of parts that work together to solve rhetorical problems. However, critics have pointed out two major weaknesses of this model: being too vague and generalised. It is too vague because there is no mention of how the writer *actually* produces text; it is too general because it suggests a single process for all writers without considering the possible variations of different writers (Furneaux, 1998). One can perhaps even question the validity and reliability of their studies, based on which the model was established by, for example, scrutinizing their research design and methodology. Nevertheless, this model is based on research and provides a very detailed account of the writing processes. It also provides researchers with a solid platform on which they pursue further research. For example, researchers such as Bracewell et al. (1982) added specificity to Flower and Hayes' original model; Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) offered a model that differentiates the process of novice writers from that of more skilled ones. Since it came into the field of writing research, the Flower and Hayes cognitive model of writing has been widely quoted and adopted in both L1 and L2 writing research.

The writing process research mentioned above all relates to L1 writing. Although L2 writing teaching has been around well before the 1980s, it has generally not been based on theories gained from research (Krapels, 1990) because of the lack of studies on L2 writing at that time. Early process-oriented L2 writing research largely adopted L1

writing process research designs (for example, Chelala, 1981; Gaskill, 1986; Hall 1987; Jones, 1982, 1985; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Pfingstag, 1984; Urzua, 1987; and Zamel, 1982 & 1983). Research designs and methodologies in L2 writing will be discussed in greater detail in section 2.3 in this chapter.

Writing processes and strategies of L2 writers

In Zamel's (1982) case study of eight ESL college students with different L1s, she found that these students (classified as proficient writers) used different strategies to tackle their assigned writing tasks in their courses. To generate ideas and to figure out ways to proceed, some read and reread course materials to get a feel while some held a kind of internal dialogue: "a conversation with an invisible person" (Zamel, 1982: 200). When it came to writing, some began with some sketchy notes; only a few wrote an outline. For those students who used outlines of different levels of detail, one found "the actual writing both boring and mechanical" (p.200) while the other found that he did not necessarily use it and that the paper produced often was different from the original outline. The participants also reported that they needed "a great deal of time not only to actually write, but also to leave their writing and come back to it again and again and reread it to go on" (p.200). This is one of the main findings of Zamel's study: the writing process itself helps writers discover meaning. Her findings imply that revision should become the main focus of writing instruction and that teacher should intervene "to guide students through the process" (p.206). She also comments on the form-focused teaching method: "Syntax, vocabulary, and rhetorical form are important features of writing, but they need to be taught not as ends in and of themselves, but as the means with which to better express one's meaning" (p.207).

In another study to further examine the writing processes of ESL students, Zamel (1983) investigated six advanced ESL student writers, both skilled and unskilled (who had already completed two semesters of freshman composition and were in their sophomore year) by observing them as they were writing an essay, interviewing them on completion of writing, and examining their completed essays. Her main findings include: (1) the stages of the composing processes – usually characterised as *prewriting*, *writing*, and

revising (editing) – are not linear but recursive, which confirm similar findings from previous studies such as Emig (1971), Sommers (1980) and Flower and Hayes (1981) and holds true for both skilled and unskilled writers; (2) during *prewriting* all students spent time thinking about the topic; some transcribed their thoughts into notes, lists or diagrams while others simply had nothing written down; (3) during actual *writing* “the writing was consistently recursive and generative and sometimes even verbalized aloud...All of the students...reread and considered what was already written...through this backward process of rereading, the writers were constructing meaning while assessing it at the same time” (Zamel, 1983: 172-173), which seems to enable them to move on, and (4) the *revising* “occurred throughout the process...changes were most often global” (p.173), which means deleting sentences or paragraphs and reorganising paragraphs. The main difference between skilled and unskilled writers (particularly obvious in this latter stage) was that unskilled writers tended to be more concerned about (even distracted by) surface features and local problems of changing words or phrases that did not matter much in improving meaning construction.

In conclusion, Zamel (1983), suggests, among other things, that ESL writing instructors should intervene throughout the process, from prewriting to revising, with a view to developing students’ strategies in different stages. Also, students should learn that *content and meaning* come first before language because any premature focus on form (grammatical accuracy and usage) can hinder purposeful, meaningful communication. This is a clear departure of the form-focused pedagogical approach.

In another writing process study, Raimes (1985) looked into the composing process of eight ESL students with different L1s. The students, deemed “unskilled” by their scores on a university-wide writing test, were given a maximum of 65 minutes to complete an assigned narrative essay. The writing was done in a language laboratory, where students’ composing-aloud was recorded using audiotapes. Detailed questionnaires on their background, education, attitude toward English etc. were also administered before the task. In contrast to Zamel’s (1983) findings, Raimes found that her unskilled student writers paid less attention to revising and editing (only 58%

concentrated on surface features and local problems). She offered three possible reasons for this phenomenon. First, the narrative writing task did not place a heavy demand on vocabulary and sentence structure. Second, “their primary concern is to get down on paper their ideas on a topic” (Raimes, 1985: 246). Third, the act of the composing aloud may take “their attention away from errors and editing” (p.246). In her conclusion, she pointed out the “extraordinary generative power of language” in that all of the participants “were uncovering the language they needed to express ideas and at the same time discovering new ideas” (p.248). This led to her suggestion that students should be given more time, which “is always in short supply in the writing classroom”, so that they could “discover and uncover the English words they need as they write” (p.248).

With special focuses on L1 versus L2 composing processes and planning strategies, Jones and Tetroe (1987) studied six ESL Spanish L1 students who were taking English course in preparation for entering graduate schools. Data were collected over a six-month period with three different writing sessions where students were assigned different topics to write essays using both their L1 and English. Think-aloud protocols were used in the sessions. Based on the analysis of the data, Jones and Tetroe (1987) argue that the writing strategies of the student writers are transferred from their L1 and that the strategies play a central role in that “those writers who can be identified as more abstract planners...achieve higher primary-trait ratings in their second-language compositions” (p.55). They also propose that although second-language proficiency affects the quality of the texts, “it appears to have little role in constraining the planning process” (p.55) because from their study even the student who was most proficient in English did the planning in Spanish. This suggested that lower level students “could have also used Spanish if proficiency was what was inhibiting them” (p.55).

To test whether “L2 writers will plan for the writing more effectively, write better texts containing more content, and create more effective texts when they are able to plan in the language related to the acquisition of knowledge of the topic area”, Friedlander (1990: 112) conducted an experiment with 28 students with Chinese L1 studying at Carnegie Mellon University. He divided his subjects into two groups writing an essay

under two different conditions, namely match and mismatch. Subjects were instructed to plan (which included brainstorming, idea generating, and planning in point form) two essays with two different topics related to: (1) a Chinese festival and (2) life at an American university. The subjects in the match condition planned the first one in Chinese and the second one in English, whereas those in the mismatch condition did the opposite. Finally, all subjects had to complete the two essays in English. The results indicate that the writers in his study “benefit when they match the language to the topic” (p.117), which means that they are able to plan more effectively, produce texts with richer content, and create more effective texts “when writing on a topic related to that language background and English on a topic related to their English experience” (p.117). He concludes that “translation from the native language into English appears to *help rather than hinder* writers when the topic-area knowledge is in the first language” (p.124, my emphasis).

Most studies mentioned so far were largely based on writing tasks given by the researchers and participants completed the tasks either in classrooms or language laboratories. They did serve the purposes of illuminating particular aspects of the writing process; however, research based on natural settings in which students have to write can perhaps reveal aspects that are more closely related to students’ rhetorical situations in their disciplines. There are a number of studies that were conducted in such natural settings and some of them are described in the following paragraphs.

Processes and strategies in disciplinary writing

Connor and Kramar (1995) investigated students’ problems, strategies and skills in their processes of writing up a subject assignment in their programme of study. They also sought to compare *task representation* among their participants, three ESL and two American graduate students in business management. They adopted Flower’s (1987) description of task representation: “an interpretative process which translates the rhetorical situation – as the writer reads it – into the act of composing” (Flower, 1987: 7, quoted in Connor & Kramer, 1995: 156-157). It entails defining the problem (based on the given task), setting writers’ goals, and devising strategies writers use to accomplish the goals. Task representation in this sense is primarily concerned with how students interpret the

instructions of the given writing task together with its constraints or parameters and translate their representation into the action of writing. In their study, Connor and Kramar (1995) revealed that “the task representation of the ESL students did indeed differ from that of the native speakers, but not uniformly”. Only two (one ESL student and one native English speaker) out of the five were successful in interpreting the task accurately and thus produced more effective assignments. They attributed their findings to the differences of students’ cultural, educational and language background. The findings are generally consistent with those of Flower’s (1990a) study on task representation in which she revealed that “students hold some significantly different, tacit representations of supposedly common academic tasks” (p.21) and because of that they may approach an assignment differently and thus produce different outcomes.

To examine how the task representation of a non-native English speaking (NNES) student influences the usage of source text information, Allen (2004) conducted a single case study on a Japanese L1 undergraduate student doing her research project at an Australian university. Data were collected from interviews, a participant journal and written texts over one semester. His study showed that the student “re-evaluated her interpretation of the research project throughout the writing process” (p.86) and such re-evaluation was not only influenced by her lecturer but also by her own evaluation of the availability of appropriate source texts. Based on his findings, he suggested that students should be provided with training to help them develop their ability to represent tasks as well as using source texts effectively.

In another study on writing in the business discipline, Yang and Shi (2003) explored six MBA (Master of Business Administration) students’ writing processes and strategies in completing their assignments which involved summarising and examining business case studies. They found that “the writing experiences of the participating students were not merely cognitive but also social processes of learning to become members of the discourse community” (Yang & Shi, 2003: 185). Also, their participants felt that the *task specifications* (that is what students are required or expected to do) of the assignments were not at all clear, which left them to guess the expectations of their

readers. Depending on participants' *guesses*, they approached their writing tasks in different ways to fulfil their perceived task specifications. To make matter even more complicated, Lung (2005), in her study on the disciplinary writing of business and law, found that although lexical signals (such as *describe, discuss, distinguish, evaluate* and *explain*) used in the task specifications across the disciplines of Accounting, Economics, Law, Management and Marketing may be the same, they have a slightly different slant of meaning due to the inherent nature of the individual discipline. Students may not be able to detect such differences in meaning and, as a result, they may fail to understand the requirements of the tasks.

To understand *readers' expectations* of students' academic writing in higher education, Lea and Street (1999) examined various writing guidance documents in a university and interviewed academic staff. They suggest that writing *task requirements* and criteria in university are complex in that they are based on different models and approaches to writing. They present four different levels in university settings that have different models, which make it difficult for students to cope with: institution, academic department, course and tutor. While the guidelines given by different academic staff in different levels can sometimes be confusing, it seems to me that in practice (at least in universities in Hong Kong) the main concern of students is perhaps the expectations of their readers (professors or lecturers), who have their own textual practices which are shaped by their backgrounds, experiences and academic departments.

With regard to task representation, Riazi (1997: 133) found that “writers interpret writing tasks and make representations of them” and such interpretations can determine their strategies employed, and “the form, substance, and style of what gets said as the writers try to balance their own goals as writers with the expectations they believe their readers bring to reading their texts” (p.133). Her findings to a large extent echo those from Connor and Kramer (1995) and Yang and Shi (2003) who have shown, among other things, that students' writing strategies follow their interpretations and representations of the task requirements or reader expectations. Apart from task representation, Riazi's

study, which involved four NNES doctoral students of education studying in Canada, also reports students' composing strategies and their views on learning from writing.

2.2.3 Social orientation

Research on how writers actually write has raised teachers' awareness of the complexity of the writing process and widened the narrowly-conceived conventional product approach that is text or form-dominated. If findings of process research are to translate into classroom practices, teachers should aim at providing a positive, encouraging learning environment in which students are allowed ample time with minimal interference to work through the "generative process" (Zamel, 1983) to produce their texts. However, with its main emphasis on the cognitive processes of individual writers and relative lack of attention to the social aspects in which texts are produced, the process approach has attracted criticisms. Critics have pointed out that the process approach has failed to situate writing socially and often omitted the social nature of writing (Martin, Christie and Rothery, 1987), focusing more on "the cognitive relationship between the writer and the writer's internal world" (Swales, 1990: 220). Bizzell (1982: 217) argues that "thinking and language use can never occur free of a social context that conditions them".

Although the process approach did attend to readers, the "focus was on known readers inside the language classroom" (Raimes, 1996: 13) such as peers and teachers who responded to the text in the writing process. It was not until more recently when a number of L2 writing process studies investigated disciplinary writing that the process approach has started to shift its focus on readers' expectations outside the language classroom (e.g. Nelson, 1990; Prior, 1991; Raizi, 1997; Yang & Shi, 2003). The focus on readers in the academia has highlighted the notion of the *academic discourse community*.

Discourse has been defined in a number of ways depending on disciplinary background and focus. Generally, it is language used in *situational context* or "language produced as an act of communication" (Hyland, 2006: 312); furthermore, the language use includes several interrelated elements: *constraints* imposed on and *choices* opened to

writers; *contexts* in which the language is used; writers' *purposes* and their *relationships* with the audience (Hyland, 2006). The situational context relates closely to the *social context*. The use of language, as a written code for communication, is seen as social action in social setting and also a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). Knowledge of discourse allows a person to assume a particular social role recognisable by members of the discourse community because discourse is, according to Gee, an identity kit that comes "complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, speak and write" (1990:142).

Researchers and scholars have long argued that discourse, written or spoken, not only "is shaped by the social context in which it takes place" but also shapes social contexts (Rubin, 1988: 1). Fairclough (1989) also suggests that language as a *social process* is conditioned by other non-linguistic parts of society and its use is subject to *social convention*. He further suggests that there are different *speech communities* under the umbrella of social institutions; each speech community has its own discourse norm embedded within its ideological norms (Fairclough, 1995: 27). Speech community as defined by Hymes (1974) is mainly concerned with speaking, whereas *discourse community* has a much wider coverage. Discourse community, as a social group, has a certain consensus about "what is worth communicating, how it may be communicated..." (Faigley, 1985: 238, quoted in Rubin, 1988: 13). In other words, apart from content (the 'what'), the way (the 'how') a text is constructed is also broadly agreed among members. Each discourse community also has "its own set of shared communicative practices, or genres, which the community recognizes and uses..." (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999: 6-7). Rafoth (1988) suggests that *writers, readers* (as members of the community) together with *texts* make up a discourse community. All the community norms and the consensus for written discourse are embodied in texts through which members engage themselves. Purves (1986: 39), with specific reference to academic writing, observes that:

Instruction in any discipline is acculturation, or the bringing of the student into the "interpretive community" of the discipline. And there is evidence that each discipline is also a "rhetorical community", which is to say a field with certain norms, expectations, and conventions with respect to writing.

Another concept related to the notion of discourse community is communities of practice developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). One of the aspects that characterizes group members of a community either in the workplace or in education is “a *shared repertoire* of common resources of language, styles and routines by means of which they express their identities as members of the group” (Barton & Tusting, 2005:2, original emphasis). This “shared repertoire” of language is realised through texts when members carry out their daily activities.

The common thread in these interpretations of discourse, discourse community and communities of practice is that each discipline in the academy (for example, business management, engineering and social sciences) has its own set of communicative practices and discourse structure that are manifested through texts. And through texts, members of respective disciplines construct their social identities (Fairclough, 1995) or identities of members of the particular disciplinary community, for example, engineers, lawyers, economists and management professors. This is perhaps the reason why written texts are often referred to as the life blood of academics. Hyland (2000: 3) puts it succinctly that “what academics principally do is write: they publish articles, books, reviews, conference papers...they communicate with students by handouts, study guides and textbooks...” Students in higher education, as novice writers in their disciplines, also rely on written texts, such as assignments and project reports, to obtain grades and credit points to complete their degree programmes. In the learning process, they are being acculturated into the disciplines through exposure to the texts they are assigned to read and production of texts as their assignments. This learning process can also be seen as a process in which students engage and participate in a community of practice.

With academic texts playing such an important role for both academics and students, it is not surprising that a large number of studies have been carried out in the area of EAP. One important theory that is closely related to the study of EAP is genre theory. Although the concept of genre, traditionally a literary construct, is not new and can be traced back in classical rhetoric and folklore studies (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004), its use has been extended to the study of films, music, professional and academic

communications. With its increase in significance in professional and academic communications, a rather complex theory of genre has developed over the last twenty years in the fields of linguistics, social and cultural studies.

Swales (1990: 58) defines genre as “a class of communicative events” with “communicative purposes” which are “recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community” and a specific genre is characterised by similar patterns of “structure, style, content and intended audience” (p.58). His seminal studies on ‘Introductions’ to research articles (RA) (1981, 1990) have used structural move analyses to describe the structuring of texts. In his 1981 study, he investigated a total of 48 RA introductions from the disciplines of physics, biology/medicine and social sciences. As a result, he identified four ‘moves’ in the introduction sections of the RA, namely (1) Establishing the field, (2) Summarising previous research, (3) Preparing for present research, and (4) Introducing present research. He later revised the ‘4-move’ model and proposed the *Create a Research Space* (CARS) model for article introductions comprising only three moves (Swales, 1990).

After Swales (1981), there have been a number of studies using structural move analyses to describe patterns of structure in genres such as introduction sections taken from various academic disciplines (Crookes, 1986), article introductions from the publications of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (IEEE) (Cooper, 1985), conference papers on irrigation and drainage (Hopkins, 1985), introduction and discussion sections of MSc dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1986, 1994), and more recently the schematic structure of literature reviews in doctoral theses of applied linguistics (Kwan, 2006). Besides examining the structure, which is mainly related to the writers’ communicative purposes, these studies also look at the linguistic aspects of the texts. Their main focus is on how the ‘move’ or steps in the ‘move’ are realised through linguistic features; in other words, how communicative purposes are realised through the form.

The focuses on formal patterns and lexico-grammatical realization of communicative purposes embodied in a genre are widely recognised as the characteristics of two of the three approaches to genre analysis, namely the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and the Australian School (Flowerdew, 2002). Another approach, namely the New Rhetoric (NR), views genre in a somewhat different way. The NR group is more focused on the *rhetorical situation* or *situational context* in which the genres are situated (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Freedman & Medway, 1994). Miller's (1984) work '*Genre as social action*' has been influential in the NR approach. For Miller (1984: 159), genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" and being an action, "it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose" (p.163). The "typified rhetorical actions" and "meaning from situation and from the social context" can be viewed as "socially recognized ways of using language... to respond to and construct texts for recurring situations" that members of a discourse community usually can recognize, and understand the texts by drawing on "their repeated experiences of particular contexts" (Hyland, 2006, cited in Johns et al, 2006: 237). Paltridge (Johns et al, 2006), referring to academic writing, also views genre as "a socially-approved way in which students show what they know, what they can do, and what they have learned in a course of study" (p.235) drawing on their previous experiences with the genre to produce the text such as an assignment.

Being new to or 'outsiders' of a particular disciplinary community, student writers often lack the "genre knowledge" and therefore "often struggle to create appropriate texts" (Hyland, 2006, cited in Johns et al, 2006: 237). Genre knowledge, according to Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995: 4), "embraces both form and content, including a sense of what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation...". "Form" includes both the rhetorical and linguistic conventions while knowledge of "content" includes subject-matter knowledge, which students need to show to the professors as mentioned by Paltridge above. However, whether "content" or the choice of content is appropriate or not depends to a large extent on students' ability to "connect with the value systems of their disciplinary audiences or...at least with the expectations of their subject teachers" (Hyland, 2006, cited in Johns et al, 2006: 238).

To sum up, genre theories have drawn our attention to the strong connection between social context, content and form. Knowledge of such connection or the lack of it would to a large extent determine the success or failure of disciplinary writing.

Empirical research on social context and disciplinary writing

Students' acquisition and development of genre knowledge, which is closely connected to discourse or disciplinary community, has become one of the focuses of a growing body of empirical research on social context in which written genres are situated. Other related areas of focuses include (1) the academic writing situation, i.e. the genre and the specific demands of the writing, and the ways in which students respond to such demands as well as problems they encounter, and (2) how students are initiated into a discourse or disciplinary community through reading and writing. Embodying the social context in which academic writing is accomplished has moved writing process research from artificial settings (such as students' English classrooms or language laboratories) to natural settings, i.e. various disciplinary sites in which students are studying. In the following paragraphs, I attempt to synthesise findings from some of these studies.

In their studies of undergraduate students' writing in the Social Sciences, Faigley and Hansen (1985) reveal how writing as a form of *social action* can impact on the success or failure of the academic writing of their participants. Seen as a form of social action, writing is "an activity vital to the organization and maintenance of a discipline" (p.148). One of the participants in their study produced a paper "that was nearly flawless in mechanics and conformity to a disciplinary format", and this impressed her English teachers. However, it failed to impress her sociology professor because of her failure to "demonstrate an adequate knowledge of that discipline" (p.147). In contrast, another participant in the same course obtained a much better grade although there were irregularities in the grammar and mechanics of her paper. This study shows that a disciplinary community, as a social group, has a certain consensus about "what is worth communicating, how it may be communicated..." (Faigley, 1985: 238, quoted in Rubin, 1988: 13). The problem is that the 'what' is the content expected from the professors of a particular discipline and this is often beyond the knowledge of most English teachers. On

the other hand, the content “worth communicating” may not be explicit in the task requirements as Yang and Shi’s (2003) study mentioned in section 2.2.2 above and the following studies have shown.

Lea and Street (2000), in their study of student writing and staff feedback in higher education, find that although academic staff “have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitute the elements of a good piece of student writing”, they have difficulties in explicitly describing “what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment” (pp. 38-39). A quotation from a lecturer they interviewed sums it up: “I know a good essay when I see it but I cannot describe how to write it” (p.40). They conclude that writing in university is an ‘institutional’ issue; “the institution within which tutors and students write defines the conventions and boundaries of their writing practices...” (p.44).

In his survey to find out what writing tasks students in US universities were required to do, Horowitz (1986:449) identified and categorised seven types of typical academic writing tasks. They were (1) summary of/reaction to a reading, (2) annotated bibliography, (3) report on a specified participatory experience, (4) connection of theory and data, (5) case study, (6) synthesis of multiple sources, and (7) research project. He argued that knowing the actual tasks students had to write could help EAP teachers design and deliver writing courses that were adequately situated in academic contexts. While these seven categories may not be totally valid today in universities in US or elsewhere, research of this nature can indeed inform EAP course material design and classroom practice to better help students cope with their actual writing demands.

Currie’s study focused on the conceptual or intellectual activities demanded by disciplinary writing tasks in university. These are the activities students need to engage in to complete their assignments in their disciplines. Her study revealed that (1) the course expected students to do several tasks which involved different conceptual activities in their assignments; “none of the course handouts, however, explicitly mentioned these requirements” (1993:111) and (2) the assignments entailed a “wide variety in both

conceptual activity and genre” (p.112) with which her participants, three NNES students, had different degrees of difficulty to cope. She concluded that if the professors had been aware of the conceptual demands upon students, they would have been able to better help students acquire the necessary skills through instructions. And “such instruction could have contributed to a greater demystification of the disciplinary expectations and thus to a more effective enculturation of novices into the community” (p.113). Her findings also imply that more research to “demystify” disciplinary writing and its impacts on students, especially NNES students, is needed to help EAP teachers understand more about the actual difficulties these students have in situated academic writing.

Given the difficulty of pinning down disciplinary expectations in writing tasks, there were a number of studies attempting to explore the experiences and coping strategies of students in higher education. Leki (1995) looked into strategies NNES students from different disciplines developed in response to the writing demands encountered in their disciplinary courses at a US university. Employing a qualitative case study approach, she collected a variety of data from five NNES students and used analytic induction to analyse the interview data. Her findings revealed that all participants were able to adapt their own already well developed coping strategies, either consciously or subconsciously, to the varying writing demands from different disciplines. Often they relied on the strategies that had brought them writing successes in the past more than what they might have learned from ESL writing classes. Thus, she suggested that EAP courses should include a discussion of strategies that were found to be effective in coping with writing demands across the curriculum.

In another study examining the problems that NNES students encountered in the process of adapting to the requirements of discipline-specific written discourses during their first year of studies in the US, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) followed four foreign postgraduate students for nine months. Based on data gathered from multiple sources including interviews, class observations, participant journals and written texts, they found that “there are a number of problems that make writing in one’s nonnative language for academic purposes an extremely complex cognitive and social task” (p.522).

Some examples of cognitive problems are: differences in rhetorical style, disciplinary variations in text structure and organisation, field-specific academic register and writing process. Examples of social problems are: personality, group orientation and interaction with professors (pp.503 -507). Their conclusion, somewhat different from that of Leki (1995), is that NNES students studying in US are often “not able to cope with this [academic writing] situation on their own and therefore need extra help” (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999: 522) even if, as Leki (1995) found out, these students in the end found a number of ways to cope with the problems that arose from their writing tasks.

With such complexities of the often tacit disciplinary expectations of the form (rhetorical and linguistic conventions) and content, how student writers of different levels acquire the necessary genre knowledge (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995) to enter a disciplinary community has prompted scholars and researchers to carry out research in this area. In their study of the enculturation of a PhD student into the research community of social science, Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (1991) found that the major part of the enculturation or initiation process was “learning how to use appropriate written linguistic conventions for communicating through disciplinary forums [mainly papers and publications]” (p.193). They also found that the student participating in their study acquired such knowledge largely through his *exposure* and *practice* (the reading and writing he had to do) and the *reinforcement* (interaction with his professors and peers). They concluded with, among other things, the following observation and pedagogical question (pp.211-212): (1) the enculturation process is often difficult and students often have to struggle to become competent members of the disciplinary community, and (2) what type of training can best prepare students to enter into the community?

The findings of Freedman and Adam’s study (1996) to some degree echo some of Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman’s (1991) findings. In comparing the learning of written genres between undergraduates in university and graduate student interns in the workplace in similar disciplines, Freedman and Adam (1996) found that the learning processes in both settings bore similarities. Both processes are (1) “based on the notion of learning through performance or engagement – “learning through doing”...”, and (2)

“social – instructors and learners collaborate” (Freedman & Adam (1996: 399). In both settings, they learn new genres through engaging in activities not through explicit instructions. In the university setting, students learn to write the appropriate genres of the discipline by immersing in the “discursive context” (pp.405 – 407) created by the instructors through lectures, seminars, readings and performing activities. But as Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (1991) mention, such an initiation process is often difficult for students without any help from appropriate training programmes.

The studies reviewed in the preceding paragraphs underscore the importance of writing contexts and activities taking place in such social contexts. Chin (1994: 445) argues that “there is little agreement about what constitutes context as a theoretical construct”. Thus, she attempted to “problematize context as a construct so that we may begin to define more clearly what constitutes contexts for writing” (p.446). She did it through a year-long ethnographic study of the writing development of a group of master’s degree students in a professional journalism program at a US university. Her findings show the impact of the *immediate context*, notably the physical environment in which the students’ writing and learning took place, had on the choices students made in their writing. Her main argument seems to centre on the importance of *situatedness* on writing research as described by Witte (1992). And this “encompasses both the physical, material location of bodies...and the writer’s representation of what it means to occupy these locations or to engage in particular kinds of activities” (p.456). The acts of *situated writing*, as suggested by Prior (2004: 171), “are themselves complex composites” and embody many different kinds of activities (such as reading their own notes/source materials, eating snacks and talking to themselves) that seem “related to the writing, to managing the emotions as well as the creative process” (p.171). He further suggests that “many texts (but not all) are produced across multiple moments of composing and inscription and involve a trail of related texts. Many texts (but not all) involve the active participation of two or more people... All writing draws on writers’ knowledge, beliefs, and practices, built up through experiences of socially and historically situated life events... To understand how a text comes into being requires looking broadly at contexts as well as closely at *specific situated activity*” (pp.171-172, my emphasis).

In another ethnographic study of disciplinary socialisation through writing of a group of first year sociology doctoral students, Casanave (1995) found that students shaped the writing context by diverse ways of interactions with their professors, fellow students, the system of training, and the writing tasks. She echoes the view of Chin (1994) that in studying *situated writing* of students, researchers should consider the immediate, local and interactive factors or the “microsociety” that students inhabit (Belcher & Braine, 1995: xxiv) in addition to the “global factors” of disciplinary community. Some students participating in her study referred to the doctoral writing process as a *game with rules*. The trick to participate in it successfully was “in learning how to play the game and step in and out of it as necessary” (Casanave, 1995: 108). Clearly, such rules are developed from the conventions and discursive practices of the disciplinary community which are influenced by the institutional practices of the university and its professional community. However, these rules are often tacit (e.g., Currie, 1993; Lea & Street, 2000) and students often have to learn the rules through extended immersion in the discipline (e.g., Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991; Freedman & Adam, 1996). This leads to the argument put forward by EAP scholars (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990; Williams & Colomb, 1993) that in order to make the academic initiation easier for NNES students it is necessary for EAP teachers to explicitly teach genres and their social contexts in classrooms.

To find out how multilingual writers develop their skills in producing genres in disciplinary communication, Tardy (2004) investigated how four international students pursuing postgraduate degrees in a US university approached their writing tasks. Based on the findings of her study and previous research on development of genre knowledge, she offered a model of genre knowledge development for multilingual writers. Her model has three major parameters which interact with one another in the development of genre knowledge: *individual*, *community* and *task*. Briefly, the ‘individual’ parameter embraces personal history (such as linguistic background) and current writing practice of writers. The ‘community’ parameter refers basically to the discourse/disciplinary community where writers “build subject-matter knowledge, encounter multiple (often interlinked) genres...” (p.297). Finally, the ‘task’ refers to the task and course requirements which

provide goals to writers. Through such “goal-directed tasks that practice – and eventually new knowledge – is gained” (p.298). Her model to a large extent sums up the essential elements of how NNES students develop the necessary genre knowledge to successfully cope with the writing demands in their disciplinary programmes.

Given the complexity of writing in disciplinary contexts, many studies have investigated the extent to which ESL or EAP programmes can help students cope with their disciplinary writing demands (e.g., Bacha, 2003; Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Duff, 2001; Zhu, 2004b). These studies point out that ESL or EAP programmes should play a more important role in helping students develop their genre knowledge in order to facilitate their disciplinary enculturation process. However, several studies have indicated that general ESL/EAP courses are not effective in helping students cope with their disciplinary writing demands. In a longitudinal study of the reading and writing of a Japanese student studying in a US college, Spack (1997) found that the ESL courses this student had taken could not help her cope with writing in her disciplinary courses. Spack (1997:50) remarks that “our work in ESL courses is vulnerable, that academic skills are not fixed, that academic tasks can be understood only within specific contexts, that all academic work is socially situated”. Johnston’s (1994) study of six Japanese EFL students at an English-medium university in Japan also found that five of the students said that the EFL courses they had taken had not helped with their writing in their disciplinary courses.

2.2.4 Conclusion

Research on L2 writing has evolved from focusing on product, to process and to social contexts in which writers produce texts. Each research focus or orientation has its own historical background and reasons that prompt the research. The *product-oriented approach* to writing research primarily focuses on the **linguistic perspective** of writing, which includes lexical-grammar and organisation of sentences into paragraphs. The *process-oriented approach*, with its focus on what happens when writers write and how texts come into being, sheds light on the **cognitive perspective** of writing, which includes strategies for reading, writing, understanding and getting resources. The social context-

oriented approach together with genre theories allows us to understand how and why writing is not an entirely private and individual matter; with this **social perspective**, we are able to look at writing beyond texts and cognitive aspect.

This review of previous research also shows that readers' expectations of both the content and form are rarely explicitly stated in the task specifications/instructions of the written tasks. To further complicate the matter, those same lexical signals used in the specifications may vary in meaning across different disciplines, which makes it more difficult for NNES students to interpret the task accurately. Different task representations/interpretations would then lead to different outcomes in terms of writing processes and products. Clearly, research is needed to investigate this highly complex phenomenon. However, most L2 writing process studies were either conducted in artificial/experimental settings (for example, Boshier, 1998; Chelala, 1981; DiPardo, 1994; Friedlander, 1990; Gaskill, 1986; Hall, 1987; Jones, 1982, 1985; Sasaki, 2000; Tsang, 1996; and Wang & Wen, 2002) or mainly focused on the cognitive perspective of writing or a particular aspect of writing processes such as planning/revising (for example, Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985; and Zamel, 1982, 1983). More recently, researchers have begun to cast their net wider. There has been more research encompassing product, process and social context (e.g. Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Faigley and Hansen, 1985; Leki, 1995; Riazi, 1997; Yang & Shi, 2003). Given the complexity and context-dependent nature of disciplinary writing in English L2 as described in this chapter, *more rigorous research situated* in a particular disciplinary context that encompasses linguistic, cognitive and social/cultural perspectives is needed. However, most studies of disciplinary writing in undergraduate programmes, as reviewed in this chapter, were conducted in North America. Very few similar in-depth studies that have been published were conducted in Hong Kong. The present study seeks to develop a more complete account of the writing processes through which NNES business undergraduates in Hong Kong complete their written assignments within their disciplinary and social contexts. A combination of three different yet complementary perspectives, i.e. linguistic, cognitive and social, will be adopted in order to develop a more complete account of the multiple facets of disciplinary writing in a natural setting.

Conceptual framework of the study

What follows is a conceptual framework of the present study based on the literature review presented and discussed in this chapter. In the context of disciplinary writing, students, in response to a given academic writing *task* (which may involve different *genres*), interpret or represent the task as they understand it and translate their interpretations into a series of actions using resources available to them in their *immediate context* to produce the *text* (the *product*). The entire *process* takes place within the global context of the disciplinary community to which students belong as well as within the more *immediate and local context* which they inhabit. The local context is multidimensional which includes home, class, classmates, educational background and experiences of writing (or what Ackerman (1990: 193) calls “literate heritage”). That is why academic writing tasks are what Prior (1995: 76) described as “fundamentally situated and multiple”. They are *situated* in particular contexts; they are subject to *multiple* (task) representations or interpretations by individual students and such representations are “subject to many influences and may evolve in surprising ways during writing” (Flower, 1990b: 36). In order to better understand how such tasks, which have been proven to be extremely complex, are accomplished, we need to draw on theories and research approaches provided by the three orientations i.e. linguistic, cognitive and social, which complement rather than compete with one other. The alignment of *writers*, *readers*, *texts* and *contexts* will better illuminate the multiple facets of disciplinary writing.

2.3 Research methods in L2 writing processes

In this section, I review and discuss the common approaches and methods used in L2 writing process research. Such review and discussion will allow for an informed choice of research methods that fit the purposes and suit the nature of the present study.

Most studies of writing processes used a case study approach and employed qualitative methods (e.g. Chelala, 1981; Connor & Kramar, 1995; Haas, 1994; Jones, 1982, 1985; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Nelson, 1993; Raimes, 1985; Spack, 1997; Yang & Shi, 2003; Zamel, 1982, 1983). The number of participants involved in the research was usually rather small, which can range from one (e.g. Haas, 1994; Hildenbrand, 1985; Pflingstag, 1984; Spack 1997) to eleven (e.g. Jacobs, 1982). Most researchers of these studies gathered data from multiple sources. These sources can be divided into five types: (a) face-to-face interviews, (b) diaries or logs, (c) direct observations, (d) think-aloud protocols, and (e) written documents.

2.3.1 Interviews

Interviews in writing research are usually open-ended or semi-structured. The purposes of interviews are usually to elicit information about (1) specific aspects of the writing processes, such as how participants interpreted and tackled the writing task, and (2) their feelings and experiences of the writing task. Since an interview is usually a participant's oral account of what happened during their writing process, it can be classified as one type of *retrospective data* (Greene & Higgins, 1994:115).

Stimulated recall

Apart from the commonly used questioning technique to elicit information, videotapes sometimes have been used to stimulate recall. Typically, participants are videoed while they are composing. Then, researchers watch the videotapes with the participants, pausing the tapes periodically to ask about their writing and thought processes. This technique was first used in the study of L1 writing (e.g. Rose, 1984). It was then used by a number of L2 writing studies (e.g. Boshier, 1998; DiPardo, 1994; Gaskill, 1986; Hall, 1987; Jones, 1985; and Sasaki, 2000). The data collected through

stimulated recall is believed to be more accurate than those from traditional interviews (DiPardo, 1994:168). However, the use of videotape is often limited by the research setting. For instance, it would be extremely difficult if not impractical to video participants while they are doing their written assignments in natural settings, such as their homes or campus libraries. That is why use of this technique has so far been confined to research on artificial/experimental settings.

Text-based interviews

Another technique to stimulate elicitation of information is *text-based interviewing*. As the name suggests, written texts (typically texts, including drafts, produced by the participants) are used during the interview to stimulate recall of different aspects of the writing task the participants have done. In an ethnographic study of writing and response in graduate seminars, Prior (1995) used text-based interviews as one of the instruments to collect his data.

2.3.2 Diaries or logs

Another type of retrospective data takes the form of diaries or logs kept by participants. A diary or log as a data collection instrument is defined as “a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analysed for recurring patterns or salient events” (Bailey, 1990: 215). In writing process research, typically participants keep entries of details of their activities and feelings in the form of diaries or logs. This research method has been used in a number of studies related to students’ reading/writing/learning processes and individual experiences (e.g. Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Haas, 1994; Morrison & Galloway, 1996; Nelson, 1990, 1993; Prior, 1998; Sternglass & Pugh, 1986; Sternglass, 1988) with good results. It has attracted some criticisms though, which will be discussed later in this section.

2.3.3 Direct observations

In writing process research, observations are usually done in two ways depending on the purposes of the research: writer and class observations. In writer observations, researchers observe participants while they are writing and use field notes to record the observations (e.g. Zamel, 1982, 1983). In class observations, researchers attend the class sessions with the participants and take field notes (e.g. Prior, 1998).

2.3.4 Think-aloud protocols

Participants are to verbalise what they are thinking or doing while writing; thus, it is also called *composing aloud*. Their verbalised thoughts are tape-recorded for later transcription and analysis. This method of data collection is usually classified as *concurrent data* (in contrast to *retrospective data*) because they are collected when the participants are performing the writing tasks. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Emig's (1971) study of L1 writing, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, is often referred to as the first research using think-aloud protocols. A decade later, Flower and Hayes (1981) in their seminal study of writing process employed this method to reveal the complex cognitive activity of writing. Since then, a number of studies on L2 writing process used this method to collect data (e.g. Chelala, 1981; Jones, 1982; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Roca de Larios et al, 1999; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Yang & Shi, 2003). This method of data collection, however, has a number of weaknesses which limit its use. These will be discussed later in this section.

2.3.5 Documents

Documents can include participants' written drafts, final products (usually the writing tasks such as assignments or project reports), reference materials used to produce the writing tasks, course documents and handouts from professors. Almost all writing process studies, to a greater or lesser extent, use various types of written texts as one of their data sources.

2.3.6 Discussion and conclusion

Almost all writing process researchers use face-to-face interviews and participants' written texts to collect data; some researchers add class observations to their data sources if circumstances allow. They are different mainly in whether they employ *think-aloud protocols* (concurrent data) or *diaries* (retrospective data) to understand the writing processes of their participants. What follows is a discussion of think-aloud protocols and diaries as data collection instruments in L2 writing process research.

Think-aloud protocols (concurrent account)

While think-aloud (or composing aloud) protocols have been around for more than three decades, some researchers have criticized the effect this method may have on the participants and their writing processes. Zamel's two studies (1982, 1983) of L2 writing did not use composing aloud protocols for her data collection (reviewed earlier in this chapter). She had considered using it, but ultimately rejected it because "there is some doubt about the extent to which verbalizing aloud one's thoughts while writing simulates the real composing situation" (Zamel, 1983:169). She cited findings from Perl (1980) and Faigley and Witte (1981) to support her views. Although Perl had used the composing aloud technique in her PhD research, she admitted that "it is conceivable that asking students to compose aloud changes the process substantially, that composing aloud is not the same as silent composing..." (1980: 19). Faigley and Witte (1981:412) had similar observations:

Verbal protocols [referring to think-aloud] require writers to do two things at once – they must write and they must attempt to verbalise what they are thinking as they pause. Perhaps some subjects can be trained to do both tasks with facility, but many writers find that analyzing orally what they are doing as they write interferes with their normal composing processes, interrupting their trains of thought. (as cited in Zamel, 1983:169)

Pennington and So (1993) in their study of the writing process and product of six Singaporean university students used direct observation and retrospective interviews to collect data. They had also considered using think-aloud protocols but did not use it

because they were sceptical about the validity of data collected. They thought it was likely that “think-aloud procedures might be especially disruptive of the (normal) composing process of L2 writers, who have less cognitive capacity available during L2 composing...” (p.48). Indeed, this method could be more problematic in L2 writing research. The crucial point is what language the participants should use in verbalizing their thoughts while composing in their L2. If they use their L2, their oral proficiency “may be insufficient to verbalise complex thought processes” (Polio, 2003: 47). However, using L1 to describe what is in their mind while they are composing in their L2 could be in itself a daunting task that would probably add to their “cognitive load” (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984).

Other researchers experienced more or less the same problems when they tried to use think-aloud protocols in their L2 writing process studies. In their case study investigating the problems that NNES students encountered in the process of adapting to the requirements of disciplinary writing during their first year of studies in the US, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) reported that they originally planned to use think-aloud protocols but eventually had to replace it with participant reflective journals (similar to participant diaries). This was because all four participants in their study felt that (1) “this way of working [was] very disturbing... and unnatural, and (2) “thinking aloud required an extra effort and time on their part” (pp.498-499). In short, the demand of focusing on two different cognitive tasks at the same time was simply too much for the participants.

Diaries or logs (retrospective accounts)

Compared with concurrent think-aloud protocols, diaries are retrospective, which means they can free a writer from the extra “cognitive load” resulting from the think-aloud process as reported by researchers. They could also “offer the benefit of hindsight and reflection on writers’ practices” and “provide valuable insights into both social and psychological processes that might be difficult to collect in other ways.” (Hyland, 2002b:188). Another advantage of using participant diaries over concurrent think-aloud protocols is that in some situations “when it is simply not feasible or desirable to collect data from subjects during the task performance” (Nunan, 1992:124), participants’

retrospective accounts seem to be the only way to collect data. This is especially the case when the research is conducted in natural settings, which can make data collection logistically impracticable and ethically improper (Morrison, 2002b). Impracticable because “researchers cannot be everywhere” (Morrison, 2002b: 218) and ethically improper because “researchers should not be everywhere” (p. 218). In these cases, diary accounts become the best alternative or trade-off against other methods such as observation, video and audio recordings.

Even though there are benefits of using diaries or logs to collect data, some researchers question their reliability. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) argue that the limited capacity of short-term memory of people can lead to unreliable data because there is always a gap between the writing activities and the diary entries. Ericsson and Simon (1984), however, argue that the reliability of the data can be enhanced by ensuring that participants make their diary entries soon after the writing events have taken place, thereby shortening the gap. They also point out that:

Retrospective accounts can reveal in remarkable detail what information [participants] are attending to while performing their tasks, and by revealing this information, can provide an orderly picture of the exact ways in which tasks are being performed, the strategies employed, the inferences drawn from information, the accessing of memory by recognition. (p.220, as cited in Greene & Higgins, 1994:120)

Conclusion

To conclude, case studies seem to be the preferred choice of research approach for investigating writing processes in different contexts. Writing process researchers opt for a case study as their research design mainly because it best suits the nature of their enquires and best addresses their research questions. One of the characteristics of case study research is that it enables researchers to examine in depth one or more aspects of a particular ‘bounded phenomenon’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in real-life situations resulting in a rich account and better understanding of a phenomenon. This seems to fit in very well with the nature of most writing process research.

Almost all writing process research reviewed in this chapter used multiple sources to collect data. Interviews, direct observations, written documents are the main sources. Concurrent think-aloud protocols have drawn some criticisms and this method also poses problems for research in natural settings. Videotaping participants while they are writing also suffers similar limitations as being intrusive and therefore not desirable for research in natural settings. The next best alternative or trade-off seems to be using participant diaries to collect data which otherwise are not available. The complexity and time-consuming nature of writing process research often prompts researchers to choose to conduct their studies in an artificial setting to make their data collection and analysis more manageable. Typically, participants are assigned writing tasks (e.g. short essays) to be completed within a given time and in a selected location (e.g. classroom or language laboratory) to facilitate data collection (e.g. Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985). More research conducted in a natural setting, as discussed in section 2.2.4, is needed to shed light on how students accomplish their writing tasks in real-life context.

There is no single best method to collect fully complete and accurate data on how students accomplish their writing tasks in the social context of the discipline to which they belong and the local context which they inhabit. With the benefit of insights from researchers in this area, the present study adopted a qualitative case study approach and a combination of methods that are relatively non-intrusive such as in-depth interviews, direct observations, participant diaries and written texts. Full details of the research design and methods of data collection and analysis are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Method

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the two major research paradigms that underpin the two research approaches/methods: quantitative and qualitative. With an understanding of the research paradigm, the philosophical underpinning of inquiry, I will locate the present study in a particular paradigm and describe the research methods that best fit the purposes of this study and address its research questions. The rest of the chapter presents the design of this research, the research site, the participants, methods of data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, and ethical issues.

3.2 An overview of research paradigms and approaches

In research methodology literature, scholars and researchers have traditionally made a distinction between the two dominant research approaches: *quantitative* and *qualitative*, each of which has its own methods of enquiry and data analysis. These two approaches are underpinned by different research paradigms. ‘Paradigm’ is generally used to mean a perception, assumption or interpretation of reality. It can also be construed as “a model or framework for observation and understanding, which shapes both what we see and how we understand it” (Babbie, 2007:32). In social and educational research, there are a variety of paradigms; examples are the positivism, the phenomenology, the symbolic interactionism, the ethnomethodology, and the feminist paradigms (Babbie, 2007; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). These paradigms are sometimes subsumed under two main paradigms: the positivist (or the normative) and the interpretive (Cohen et al, 2000).

The *positivist paradigm* has its root in natural science with its method of enquiry mainly based on scientific and empirical research. People who adopt ‘positivism’ believe that “the world exists and is knowable as it really is” (Barr Greenfield, 1975; as cited in

Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 9) and that knowledge is acquired by deduction from laws or through objective, factual, real-world, observable and verifiable data. They also believe it is possible to conduct objective and value free enquiry, the goals of which are mainly to generalise results to subsequent similar phenomena and develop universal theories or laws. To achieve these goals, positivist researchers mainly employ quantitative methods, such as experiments, surveys and statistics, to collect and analyse data. They often start with a hypothesis, which is tested empirically in the research. The end result is either accepting or rejecting the hypothesis. Because of its objective and value free beliefs, the role of researcher is often detached from the data collection process and the researched, usually referred to as subjects, are often regarded as passive informants (Cohen, et al 2000).

The *interpretive paradigm*, by contrast, has a key philosophical assumption that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 2001: 6). Thus reality is subjective and dynamic as opposed to the positivist view of objective and stable reality. This is associated with the belief that “facts and values are not distinct and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher’s perspective and values, thus making it impossible to conduct objective, value free research” (Snape & Spencer, 2003: 17), which is very different from the belief of positivism. Because of such fundamental differences in their perception of seeing the world, interpretive researchers have goals and research methods distinct from those of their positivist counterparts. Their goals are mainly to understand the meaning people have constructed and their behaviour from their own maps or frames of reference in specific settings. In so doing, they take “the perspective of people being studied by penetrating their frames of reference” (Snape & Spencer, 2003: 4) or taking the *emic* perspective, which broadly refers to the *participant’s own perspective of reality*, instead of maintaining the researchers’ perspective or the *etic* perspective. Also, interpretive researchers usually aim at generating hypotheses or theories instead of testing hypotheses as most positivist researchers do (Cohen, et al 2000; Merriam, 2001). To achieve these goals, interpretivist researchers mainly employ qualitative approaches, which are characterised by naturalistic enquiry, field study, participant observation, case study and ethnography. They also try as much as possible

not to disrupt the natural setting in which the study is being carried out. The most common research instruments for qualitative research are in-depth interviews, observations, life histories, and analysis of documents and texts. In stark contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research involves the researcher, who becomes the primary instrument, in the data collection process. The role of the participant (the researched) is that of an active collaborator rather than passive informant as it usually is in quantitative research. The research strategy tends to be more flexible taking into account the social context in which the study is being carried out and the feeling of the participants.

To conclude, these two main research paradigms are in many ways contradictory to each other mainly because of their different philosophical origins and assumptions. Both paradigms in association with their different research approaches and methods have unique and valuable contributions to make to educational research. The key issue here is not about which research approach is superior; it is about the awareness of the two different paradigms with their very different epistemological bases that underpin the qualitative and quantitative approaches/methods. Researchers should “choose the approach that best addresses the questions asked” (Morrison, 2002a: 24-25). In other words, the choice of research approaches and methods should be *driven by the nature of the research problem and questions*.

3.3 Research design

Interpretive paradigm

The goal of this study was to develop a more complete account of the processes through which non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong complete their written assignments in their disciplinary and social contexts. Hence, the research has to be conducted in the *contexts* in which the students normally live and study rather than in an experimental or artificial setting like other process studies did (e.g. Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Wang & Wen, 2002). To

develop a more complete account is to provide a detailed and *thick description* of writing processes of the participants in their social contexts instead of testing a priori hypotheses. (*Thick description*, first used by anthropologists, for example, Geertz (1973), generally refers to a complete description that is *rich in detail* of a phenomenon.) This study attempts to discover and understand how they represent and make sense of their writing tasks given by their professors and how they respond to the tasks from their own frames of reference or perception of reality; thus it takes mainly an *emic* perspective as explained in the preceding section. The nature of enquiry and the naturalistic setting of this study make it natural and appropriate to adopt the *interpretive paradigm* with its key philosophical assumptions as discussed in the preceding section and its associated qualitative approach.

Longitudinal case study approach

The foregoing review of previous research on L2 writing has shown that disciplinary writing is extremely complex and situated in multidimensional contexts which include the immediate, local context which students inhabit and the global context of the disciplinary community. In order to achieve the goal and answer the research questions of this study, I employed a qualitative case study approach. A case study is a logical choice because it is particularly suited for investigating complex, people-centred, potentially multidimensional phenomena in a real-life context (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1989). As mainly an interpretive and inductive form of enquiry, a case study approach enables me to explore in depth the behaviour of the participants in response to their writing demands drawing on the resources available to them; it can lead to a detailed, rich and holistic account of students' writing processes. One of the characteristics of case studies is that data as evidence are collected from multiple sources (Yin, 1989). The data sources for this study were mainly from questionnaires (to elicit the background information of participants), text-based interviews, participant diaries and various documents relating to the assignments under study. These are presented and discussed in detail later in this chapter. In order to increase the validity of the findings of this study, a prolonged engagement with extensive field contacts is essential (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, I adopted a *longitudinal case study approach* that covered several written

assignments from the participants over a period of four semesters (two academic years). For a situated study of disciplinary writing, context is an important part and this is the focus of the next section (Chapter 4 will provide in-depth discussion on disciplinary and social contexts).

3.4 The research site

With a population of almost seven million in 2006, of which about 95% are Chinese, (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 2006), Hong Kong provides nine years' free (and compulsory) primary and junior secondary education (up to Form 3). In order to get into one of the government-funded universities, students have to pass the *Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination* (taken after completion of Form 7), including a pass grade in the 'Use of English'. Because of the limited places available, each year on average less than 50% of qualified applicants can enter such universities (University Grants Committee of Hong Kong n.d./2007).

This study was carried out in one of the seven government-funded universities in Hong Kong. Since this research aims at studying *average* students (see section 3.4.1 in this chapter), it would not be proper to choose the top or the bottom university. Although there is no official ranking of universities in Hong Kong, there has been an opinion survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong on public perception of performance of the seven universities. The university chosen for this study was at the middle of the ranking list in 2004. This university has twenty-four departments under six faculties and had about 10,000 full-time undergraduate students in the 2005-2006 academic year, of whom about 18% studied different programmes in the Faculty of Business. Almost 90% of the students are local Chinese with English as their L2. All universities in Hong Kong adopt English as the main medium of instruction and assessment (except for Chinese-related subjects) against the backdrop of biliteracy (Chinese and English) and trilingualism (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) promoted by the government. (Note: Putonghua is also known as Mandarin.)

The study was conducted in the Department of Management and Marketing, one of three departments in the Faculty of Business. With about 50 full-time academic staff (those teaching undergraduate programmes are mainly *lecturers* or *assistant professors*), the department is one of the largest departments in the university. It offers basically three 3-year undergraduate programmes majoring in (1) business studies, (2) marketing, and (3) management. To graduate with a bachelor's degree, students have to obtain 90 credits from a list of compulsory and elective credit-bearing subjects offered in a particular programme. This university adopts a semester-based academic calendar. Each academic year consists of two semesters, each of which has 14 teaching weeks. Semester one starts in September and ends in early December; semester two starts in mid January and ends in late April or early May. This study was conducted over four semesters in two academic years; the study carried out in the first semester was treated as a pilot study (see section 3.5 for detail).

Reasons for choosing the business discipline

The business administration field was chosen for this study for three reasons: (1) business administration has been one of the most popular choices for Hong Kong students as their undergraduate and postgraduate studies, (2) students are expected to have relatively higher English standards to meet the language demands in their future workplaces in the business world, and (3) both my undergraduate and postgraduate studies are in the discipline of business administration, which allows me to develop general knowledge of the concepts, nature, discursive practices and conventions of this particular disciplinary culture.

3.5 Participants

Since the main aim of this study is to understand the writing processes of *average* Hong Kong Chinese L1 undergraduate business students, the appropriate samples should not be, for example, drawn from the first or fourth quartiles by English language proficiency. I therefore aim to find average students in terms of their English proficiency.

Thus, purposeful sampling based on criteria (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007:184) was used in this study.

3.5.1 Selection of participants

The criteria for selecting participants are: (1) they must be Hong Kong Chinese L1 undergraduate business students studying for a degree either in business studies, marketing or management, (2) their grades in the Use of English (Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination) should be either D or E (which is the minimum pass grade for university entrance), (3) they should be in their year one of study (so that a longitudinal study over several semesters is possible), and (4) they should show keen interest and enthusiasm in my study (considering that this would involve them for two years).

Invitation letters were sent out to about 70 year-one students. There were about sixteen responses, out of which twelve students could meet the second criterion. In the end only two students showed keen interest and enthusiasm in the study (the last criterion) after my detailed explanation of the purpose and nature of the study. They were studying for a 3-year BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree in marketing and had just completed their first year. Although they were studying in the same programme, they belonged to different seminar groups. After explaining what they were expected to do and what benefits they would get from participating in the study (e.g., it would help them better understand their own reading and writing processes in English in an academic context), they were willing to participate and signed an informed consent statement (Appendix A), which states clearly the purpose of the study, the guarantee of confidentiality and the protection of their rights.

3.5.2 Background of participants

Data collection started soon after they agreed to take part in the study by signing the informed consent statement in September, 2004. It started with a self-completion questionnaire (Appendix B), which is composed of two parts: part 1 was designed to elicit information on their personal and education background (language in particular); part 2 was about their own evaluation of their English proficiency and their experiences of learning/using English in an academic context. To ensure confidentiality of information collected and to preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used to refer to the two students in this paper; also, the name of the university is not mentioned (ethical considerations for this study are described in detail in section 3.10). Based on the data from the questionnaires, I present their general background information in table 3.1 overleaf and briefly describe each participant below. [Note: The self-rating part of the questionnaire uses a five-point scale: Excellent (highest), very good, good, fair and poor (lowest)].

Names of Participants (pseudonyms)	Joan	Susan
Gender	Female	Female
Age	Early twenties	Early twenties
Native language	Chinese (spoken: Cantonese ¹)	Chinese (spoken: Cantonese)
Medium of instruction in secondary school (Form 1 to Form 5)	English	Chinese
Medium of instruction in post-secondary school (Form 6 and beyond)	English	English
Programme of study at university	BA in marketing	BA in marketing
HKALE: Use of English result ²	E	E
IELTS score ³	<u>Overall score: 6.5</u> (academic module) Sub-scores: Writing: 6 Reading: 6.5 Speaking: 6 Listening: 7 (Test taken in Feb 2006)	<u>Overall score: 7</u> (academic module) Sub-scores: Writing: 6 Reading: 6.5 Speaking: 7 Listening: 7.5 (Test taken in May 2005)
EAP result ⁴	B	B

Table 3.1: Background information of participants

¹ Cantonese, widely spoken in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Macau, is often regarded as one of the major dialects of the Chinese language. It is mainly used in speaking but its written form is often used informally.

² *Hong Kong Advanced Level Exam*, similar to UK's GCE A-level Exam, is normally taken by students after completion of Form 7. The results are expressed in 6 grades (A is the highest and F is the fail grade; E is the minimum grade for university entrance).

³ *International English Language Testing System*, jointly managed by the University of Cambridge, British Council and IDP Education Australia, is a test of English language proficiency. It is accepted by most Australian, British, Canadian and New Zealand academic institutions. It is scored on a 9 band scale (9 is the highest and 1 is the lowest). The exam has 2 modules for candidates to choose from: *academic* and *general training*. There are 4 papers: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Some universities in Hong Kong require their undergraduates to take this exam as an 'exit test' for English language before graduation. It is generally recognised that the minimum acceptable overall score for university graduates is 6.5. According to the IELTS band descriptors, band 6 is described as 'competent user' and band 7 is 'good user'.

⁴ *English for Academic Purpose* (EAP) is an English course for all first-year students in the participants' university. It focuses on writing and speaking skills in an academic context.

Joan

Like most local Chinese, Joan started to learn English in her kindergarten. This effectively means she had been learning English for more than 17 years. She rated her overall English proficiency as just ‘fair’ and her writing skill as ‘poor’ compared with ‘good’ for both listening and speaking skills; her rating for reading was ‘fair’. Among the four skills, she found writing the most difficult skill to master, which is not only consistent with her own proficiency ratings but also her IELTS scores. This shows that she knew her own strengths and weaknesses in her English proficiency.

Writing was difficult for her because she found it difficult to express her ideas in a grammatically correct way. On the other hand, she realised that writing was the most important skill for her study because all the written assignments were in English.

Susan

Susan also started to learn English in kindergarten and had been learning the language for more than 17 years. Like Joan, she rated her overall English proficiency as ‘fair’. Her rating for writing, which was ‘fair’, was slightly better than Joan’s ‘poor’ rating. She also rated her reading skills as ‘fair’ compared with ‘good’ for both listening and speaking. Her self-ratings were again consistent with her IELTS scores: writing was the weakest while speaking and listening were the strongest.

Again similar to Joan, she found writing the most difficult skill to master; however, the reasons she gave were different from those given by Joan. She attributed her ‘fair’ writing skill to not having developed a “good foundation” and little chance of writing after secondary school. The main difficulties she encountered in writing were the use of the right format, right words and correct sentence structure. She also believed that writing was the most important skill for her study because it is the language used in all “paper work” (assignments) and written examinations.

Like most local students in Hong Kong, both Joan and Susan only use English in class: they rarely use it as their daily means of communication.

3.6 Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out in the first semester of academic year 2004/2005. The main purposes were to (1) find out the extent to which a ‘participant diary’ is an effective research instrument in collecting retrospective data for the purpose of this study and in what ways it can be made more effective, (2) familiarise the researcher with participants’ assignment demands in their disciplinary context, (3) identify potential problems pertaining to data collection, logistics and communications so that appropriate strategies could be devised to address the problems before the full-scale study, and (4) establish rapport and earn the trust of the participants, which is essential for any qualitative case studies that centre on people and their experiences.

It was found that a participant diary is an effective data collection instrument as far as the nature of this study is concerned (see next section for detail). As a result of the pilot study, the format of the diary was improved and the procedure of collecting data from it was also revised (as presented in the next section). A more effective channel of communication through, mainly, email and mobile phone was established. After the pilot study, the participants had a much better understanding of what the research was about and what they were expected to do. More importantly, I found that they were genuinely committed to the study that would continue until they graduated from the university.

3.7 Data collection

To achieve triangulation of data and enhance the trustworthiness of the result (this will be discussed in more detail in section 3.9), data were collected from multiple sources over four semesters. The sources include:

- Questionnaires
- Participant diaries
- In-depth interviews with participants and lecturers/professors*
- Documents (drafts, source texts, course documents, final versions of assignments, and returned assignments with lecturers’ feedback)
- Class observations*

*Note: The plan to interview subject lecturers/professors and observe classes was dropped because the participants were reluctant to be observed in classes and they did not want to involve their subject teachers (ethical issues will be discussed in more detail in section 3.10).

3.7.1 Questionnaires

A self-completion questionnaire was used before the study started. The main purpose was to find out participants' personal backgrounds, their perceptions of their English proficiency and their attitude toward learning and using English (see section 3.5.2).

3.7.2 Participant diaries

As discussed in the chapter 2, almost all previous writing process research employed interviews, written documents and observations (if circumstances allowed) as data collection methods. The only difference is whether think-aloud protocols or stimulated recall protocols (using mainly videotape) were used to collect concurrent data (i.e. data collected while participants are performing the writing task). However, almost all of the studies using the protocols were not conducted in natural settings. Given the nature and purposes of this study, concurrent data collection is not suitable for at least three reasons. First, it is impractical and almost impossible to observe participants or ask them to talk to a tape recorder (think-aloud protocols) or video them (stimulated recall protocols) while they are reading or writing in their *natural places of study* (my participants told me that these places include their homes, university libraries, student canteens and computer centres on campus). Second, using think-aloud protocols would interfere with their normal writing processes because it is not natural and may be unreasonable to ask them to do two things at the same time: verbalising their thoughts and writing their assignments (see section 2.3.6 for detail). Third, NNES writers (the participants in this study) have the added problem of what language they should use in verbalizing their thoughts while writing in English. If they are asked to use English, their oral proficiency is likely to be insufficient to enable them to verbalise their thoughts and feelings accurately. But using Cantonese (their mother tongue) to describe what is in their

mind while they are writing in English could be in itself a daunting task, which can change their normal writing behaviour (Polio, 2003).

Having considered the suitability of concurrent data collection, I believe that the *participant diary* is the best data collection instrument which suits the nature and fits the purposes of the present study. Some of its merits are:

- Participant diaries can provide rich, detailed and behind-the-scenes data that otherwise cannot be collected through other methods.
- For research in natural settings, which can make data collection *logistically impracticable* (as Morrison puts it “researchers cannot be everywhere” (2002: 218)) and *ethically improper* (“researchers should not be everywhere”), diary accounts become the best alternative or trade-off against other concurrent data collection methods mentioned above.
- As my pilot study shows, diaries have the potential to reveal some contextual factors which can impact on their written products. Such information could be difficult to obtain using other data collection methods.
- The pilot study also reveals that the information provided in the diaries can enrich the interviews and shed light on the analysis of texts collected from the participants.

Like other research methods, diaries have their limitations. For example, (1) their retrospective nature could mean that some information may be lost, (2) the information provided could be selective and perhaps might not be candid, and (3) it could be difficult to recruit participants and maintain their momentum and commitment over a period of time. A reflection of the pilot study shows that such weaknesses could be, to some extent, overcome by researchers’ awareness of these possible problems and by measures designed to minimize them. For example, (1) researchers should make use of post-diary interviews to recover the missed information, (2) researchers have to establish rapport with and earn trust of the participants and to maintain regular contact with them, and (3) participants have to be very clear about the purposes of the study and, particularly, the diary accounts.

Design of the diary

The design of the diary depends largely on the purposes of the research and the main questions to be addressed. In designing a framework for the diary, I had to strike a balance between a highly structured record (which would limit the freedom of the diarist to describe her experience) and an unstructured free-flowing account (which might induce large amounts of data, some of which could be unrelated to the research purpose). A semi-structured format, similar to interviewing, could possibly achieve this balance. More importantly, instructions as to the purposes, content, and timing of the diary were made very clear to the participants.

With the purposes and the main research questions in mind, I designed a structure, which was refined in light of my reflection from the pilot study. Participants were provided with an A4 size sheet divided into three columns as below to provide a structure to the participants:

<i>Date time & place</i>	<i>Activities & Purposes (what you did, why and with whom you did it)</i>	<i>Comments (feelings, problems, etc.)</i>
--------------------------------------	---	--

The three areas basically embraced the ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘who’ and ‘how’ elements:

(1) **When** and **where** did they do it? (2) **What** did they do? (3) **Why** and **with whom** did they do it? (4) **How** did they feel about it?

To ensure that participants knew exactly the purpose/audience of the diaries and what they should write, I clearly explained (the first time they kept the diaries) and kept on reminding them of the purpose and the audience (to assure them that I am the *only* reader and the content will be kept in strict confidence).

To enable them to record the subtleties of their thoughts and feelings toward an activity, they were asked to use either their L1 (written Chinese) or a mix of their L1 and L2 (English). They also were urged to use colloquial, conversational language in their

diary-keeping so that they could verbalise and capture their thoughts without any possible inhibition which may be caused by language. A sample of the diary entries is in Appendix C.

Since the accuracy of the diaries could be affected by the limitations due to time lapse and memory lapse, I asked the participants (as a result of the pilot study) to make an entry soon after they had completed a task related to their assignment, such as reading, note taking, and drafting. As Greene and Higgins (1994) point out, “recency” plays an important role in ensuring “the completeness of a retrospective account.” (p.123)

3.7.3 Text-based interviews

The text-based interview is a type of interview that uses written texts to stimulate recall of information (Prior, 1995, 1998). All the post-diary interviews used in this study are of this type.

Pre-diary interviews

At the beginning of every semester, I met them once to collect information about the subjects they had registered for that semester and found out the writing requirements for each subject by examining the course documents. In the meeting, I selected one writing task of a particular subject to be studied in the semester and asked them to start diary entry once they had begun any activity relating to the selected writing task. The rationale for selecting a particular writing task of a particular subject is described in section 3.7.5.

Post-diary interviews

Participant diaries are seldom the sole source of data. Combining diaries and interviews is essential. Post-diary face-to-face interviews serve two purposes: (1) it is one way of maintaining regular personal contact, and (2) based on the diary entries, researchers can clarify points in some entries and elicit further information to address research questions. The second purpose is more important because diary entries per se, as this study and other similar studies have shown, are never clear and complete. For

example, entries like “this is the easiest part to do...”, “keep on searching for information...and I discovered something exciting...” need interviews to bring out meanings and information. In this sense, participant diaries serve as an important instrument to *stimulate recall* during interviews.

Post-diary interviews were conducted after the participants had started to work on their assignment and thus made entries to their diaries; the frequency would depend on the intensity of their activities. I have learned from other studies using participant diaries as one of the data collection methods that the participant drop-out rate is typically high (e.g. Prior, 1998). Thus, I kept in touch with the participants regularly mainly to motivate their continuous participation in the study but also to check their progress, remind them of the timely diary keeping, and arrange interviews. We kept contact through email and mobile phone. On average we met once every two to three weeks and each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. A total of 20 interviews were conducted in this study (including the pilot study in 2004/05 semester 1). They came along with their diaries and some of the related documents such as their outlines, notes, drafts, and source materials. The main purpose of the interviews was to elicit further information and clarify certain points they had made in their diaries. The interviews were in-depth, semistructured (Denzin, 1989) but primarily *text-based*, that is focusing on their diary entries and the documents they produced. To enable the participants to talk freely about their feelings, difficulties they might have encountered and strategies they had devised to overcome the difficulties, the interviews were conducted in their L1 Cantonese.

Recording of interviews and verifications (member checks)

With the participants’ consent, the interviews were all audio recorded using an MD (mini disc) recorder in 2004. From 2005 onwards, all recordings were done by digital voice recorder (DVR). The main advantages of digital recording are: (1) recordings in audio files can be copied and securely stored in different media such as computer hard disk, MP3 player and the voice recorder itself, (2) using the software bundled with the voice recorder, researcher can book mark a particular segment of the recording for continuous playback to, for example, capture an important piece of information, and (3)

the relative small size of a DVR and the high sensitivity of its built-in microphone (which means it can be placed one meter away from the participants) make its presence hardly noticeable.

Soon after every interview, I wrote up the interview notes (about 1000 words on average per interview) capturing the essence of the interviews (a sample of these summaries is in Appendix D). The notes were given to the participants, to check that they were accurate and complete, at our next meeting (see *member checks* in section 3.9).

Transcription

I had considered whether I should fully transcribe every interview but decided that it was *neither practical nor necessary*. The reasons are:

(1) **Practicality**: Each interview lasted around 1 hour 15 minutes on average. Full transcription of all interviews (a total of around 25 hours) takes time. Walford (2001:93) estimates that it takes five hours to transcribe one hour of interview. It will take even longer if the transcription involves translation. In this study, all interviews were conducted mainly in Cantonese, the participants' mother tongue. This means it would have taken much more than five hours to do one transcription. Even if the researcher is prepared to spend the time and energy to do this, the length of the transcription makes it almost impossible to perform member checks by the participants.

(2) **Necessity**: Walford (2001) argues convincingly that unless the focus of the study is on discourse it is *not necessary* to transcribe every interview because:

- (a) transcription is "dull and mind-numbing work" (p.93) instead of making the researcher engage with the data since the focus is on the word or phrase;
- (b) using a counter in the recording device can help the researcher to locate a particular part of the conversation for repeated listening, if needed;
- (c) the transcription often misses the nuance of participants' responses such as pace and tone, which can help the researcher to capture and understand a specific meaning. Thus Walford thinks that "it is often actually better to conduct the analysis using the original tape-recordings rather than the transcripts" (2001:94).

In this study, with the software bundled with the digital voice recorder, I was able to mark accurately the exact locations in the form of numbers to those important phrases on the interview notes to facilitate retrieval of particular segments of the original recordings (see Appendix D). This helped me listen to the original recordings of particular segments, transcribe and code them, if needed, during the data analysis.

Interviewing the professors/lecturers

Initially I also planned to interview the readers of their assignments, i.e. the subject lecturers or assistant professors of the participants, soon after the participants had submitted their assignments. The main purpose was to find out their expectations with regard to content, form and language. However, the participants were reluctant to involve their teachers even though I guaranteed that I would never disclose their names. To adhere to the principles of my research ethics as presented in section 3.10, I dropped this plan. In an attempt to collect information from the content teachers' perspectives of students' written work, I attended a workshop conducted by the university's education development centre in 2006. In this workshop, where lecturers/professors from different faculties, including those from the Marketing and Management Department, explored various issues related to assessing group work, I had the opportunity to find out more about issues faced by lecturers and particularly the current methods lecturers, especially the business faculty, used to grade students' group project to ensure fairness. While I understand that information collected from the workshop is not as specific as that from interviewing the lecturers/professors, it does, to a certain degree, fill the information gap left by the participants' reluctance to allow me to interview their professors.

3.7.4 Documents

Written documents were another important source of data. They included all the written texts the participants had read and produced in order to write up their assignments. Typically, they consisted of the following types: (1) the course documents that usually provide details of course objectives, learning outcomes, recommended readings, lecture schedules, course assessments and criteria, (2) the written assignment brief or specifications, (3) participants' outlines and drafts, if any, of the assignment, (4) final

version of the assignment, (5) source materials they had read and/or used, (6) e-mail correspondence with their professors, if any, and (7) written feedback, if any, from their professors. Guided by the research questions, I studied these documents to identify and highlight any issues that needed clarifications and explorations, which were then followed up in the interviews with the participants (the *text-based interviews* mentioned above).

Class observations

Initially, I also planned to attend some of the classes (subject to permission by the professors/lecturers). The main purpose was to find out whether and in what manner the professors mentioned any things that might indicate the requirements or expectations of the written tasks students had to do. When I revealed my intention to the participants, they showed reluctance because they would feel uncomfortable with my presence in the lecture hall or classroom. Without their consent, this method of data collection was thus abandoned (see section 3.10 for more detail about ethical issues).

3.7.5 Selection of subjects

From the pilot study, it was found that almost all the credit-bearing subjects were assessed by coursework and examination. Most coursework included writing of different genres (e.g. business/marketing plan and reports; reflective essay) and oral presentations of various types. Some written assignments only required students to write a short piece of two to four pages while some others simply required them to hand in their power point slides after presentations. In order to understand how they coped with the demand of disciplinary writing in L2 in their social contexts, I selected subject assignments for this study based on the following criteria as far as possible:

- The subjects should to a large extent represent the core concept of marketing as a discipline.
- The assignments should ideally cover both *individual* and *group* writing (to see any differences in their writing behaviour and performances).
- The subjects selected should ideally include those taught by native English speaking (NES) and NNES lecturers (to see any differences in their coping strategies).

- The assignments should be relatively long in terms of required length.

By the end of the study, it was found that almost 90% of their written assignments were done in groups of three to six students. For reasons I will explain in the next chapter, lecturers preferred to assign group writing tasks rather than individual ones. Details of subjects selected for this study are listed in table 3.2 below.

Academic year and Subject selected	Type of assignment (Group/Individual)	Length requirement	Native language of professor/lecturer
2004/05 Semester 1 (Pilot study) Internet Marketing (NM)	Business plan (Group)	10 pages (excluding appendices)	Chinese
2004/05 Semester 2 <i>Distribution Management</i> (DM)	Written report (Individual)	5 to 7 pages	English
2005/06 Semester 1 <i>International Marketing</i> (IM)	Export marketing plan (Group)	Maximum 10 pages	English
2005/06 Semester 2 <i>Marketing Strategy</i> (MS) and <i>Marketing Symposium</i> (MP)	- Cosmetic Industry Analysis Project Report (Group)	10 pages	Chinese
	- Reflective essay (Individual)	1,000 words	Chinese

Table 3.2 Subject assignments selected for this study

3.8 Data analysis

Literature on qualitative studies often emphasises the importance of analysis at an early stage of the research process. Unlike quantitative data, researchers do not have to wait until all data have been collected. As Marshall and Rossman (2006:155) point out, “in qualitative studies, data collection and analysis typically go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation”. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:6) stress that qualitative data analysis “should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection...”

Benefiting from the advice and insights from qualitative research literature, I started the initial data analysis (mainly by organising and initial coding) as early as in November 2004 when I first collected data from the pilot study. The collection and analytic strategy was being modified as I developed a better understanding of the phenomenon under study through engaging with the data. Although the analysis was mainly inductive and led by data, it was guided by (1) the conceptual framework (as shown in Chapter 2) developed from review of relevant L2 writing literature and the initial findings of the pilot study, (2) the purposes of the study, and (3) the research questions.

Procedure

Based on concepts and frameworks from Miles and Huberman (1994), Wolcott (1994) as well as Marshall and Rossman (2006), I devised a seven-phase analytic procedure for this study, which was recursive and iterative. Through these phases, raw data were transformed from more specific to more general, lower to higher level of abstraction to enable interpretation and the drawing of conclusions. During the analytic process, great attention was paid to ensure that data were reduced into meaningful units and segments “without significant loss of information” and without stripping “the data from their context” (Punch, 2005:198). The seven phrases are described below:

1. Organising the data

The data collected were first of all organised into types, subjects, dates and times with distinctive tags to facilitate data storage and retrieval.

2. Engaging with the data

I started to engage with the data as soon as they were collected in order to familiarise myself with the data. The engaging processes involved reading documents collected and listening to the interviews done for basically three purposes: (1) producing a written summary of the interview to be checked by the participants in the following interview (see Appendix D), (2) raising further questions, if needed, for the following interview, and (3) organising the data.

3. Initial coding

The coding process is what Marshall and Rossman (2006:160) describe as “the formal representation of analytic thinking”. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:26) hold that instead of a mechanistic process, coding is the process of “generating concepts from and with our data, using coding as a means of achieving this”. It entails assigning labels or abbreviations to meaningful units of data to provide the basis for more advanced or higher-level coding at a later stage. Coding at this early stage was usually more *descriptive* and the initial labels were being modified in light of better understanding of the phenomena as the analysis progressed. Although there are computer programmes such as Nudist and WinMax that can assist data coding, I did not use one because I felt that Microsoft Word (MS Word) could also serve the purpose of my analysis. For example, functions in MS Word such as ‘hypertext’ can link up bits of text with those in other files. The ‘reviewing’ function allows researchers to write analytic memos on the margin of the text. The ‘find’ function can help researchers locate the coded texts. On the other hand, some scholars, for example Coffey and Atkinson (1996), are critical of researchers’ heavy reliance on computer programmes to tag, code and retrieve data segments because in so doing they tend to remove the data from their context. Computer programmes are only tools that serve to assist the analyst; making sense of data “is more

dependent on the analyst and the rigour, clarity and creativity of her or his conceptual thinking” (Ritchie, Spencer & O’Connor, 2003:219-220).

4. Higher-level coding (categorising)

At this higher-level coding, recurring patterns were identified and categorised. Less abstract, more descriptive codes from initial coding were brought together to form more *inferential* and *conceptual* categories. Codes with similar property were subsumed under a *conceptual label* to form a category. The creation of categories of meaning was based on what Guba (1978) describes as internal convergence and external divergence, which means “the categories should be internally consistent but distinct from one another... [and the researcher] identifies the salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:159). The categories and codes thus emerge from data during analysis and are not based on *a priori* sets (see Appendix E for the final coding scheme).

5. Writing analytic memos

A definition, described by Miles and Huberman as classic, of a memo in qualitative data analysis is “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding...it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages...” (Glaser, 1978: 83-84, as cited in Miles and Huberman, 1994:72). Thus, memos are “one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand” that help researchers conceptualize the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994:72).

I started writing analytic memos soon after I had the first interview with the participants and started my initial coding. At first, I wrote it in my **research diary** which recorded my thoughts and insights when I started to engage the data collected. Later on, during the more focused analysis phase, I used a different word file to keep the memos which were linked to the specific segments of text by the hypertext function. A sample of the analytic memo is in Appendix F.

6. Offering interpretations

After the five phases just mentioned, I offered interpretations of what was found from the data with the purposes of addressing the research questions. This was done by (1) evaluating and determining the usefulness and importance of the data segments, (2) selecting the data segments that can illuminate the research questions, (3) making connections between those data segments to identify their relationships and patterned regularities, and (4) offering holistic and integrative interpretations and explanations by synthesizing the data within the context they are embedded.

7. Searching for alternative understandings

In the final phase of data analysis, I engaged the interpretations more critically to search for any other plausible interpretations and explanations for the data. Such plausible interpretations were then described in the discussion section with explanations as to why a particular interpretation was more reasonable.

3.9 Validity and reliability

Being able to produce findings that are valid and reliable so that the emerging theory is well-founded is the main concern of researchers. However, because of the difference in philosophical foundation underlying the positivist and interpretive research paradigms, the accounting for their validity and reliability may take different forms. There have been arguments about the extent to which the largely positivist concept of reliability and validity should be applied equally to qualitative studies of the interpretive paradigm. With the interpretive paradigm worldview of (1) multiple constructions of reality, (2) the researcher's active involvement in data collection (the researcher is the primary instrument), and (3) the importance of understanding and meaning, the issues of reliability and validity should take another form different from that of the positivist one (Merriam, 2001). Qualitative researchers thus use the term **trustworthiness** and, with it, a set of criteria comparable to those used by their positivist counterparts to evaluate how trustworthy are the data and findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria of trustworthiness: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

Briefly, *credibility* is about the extent to which the findings are convincing to the readers. It is closely related to the positivist concept of *internal validity*, which, according to Merriam (2001:201), primarily deals with the questions of how research findings match reality and how congruent the findings are with reality. *Transferability*, equivalent to the positivist concept of external validity or generalisability, is about the extent to which the findings and conclusions of the study are transferable to other settings and contexts. *Dependability* is the qualitative researchers' concept of reliability. It is about "whether the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:278). Finally, *confirmability* "captures the traditional concept of objectivity" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006:203), which deals with the question of researchers' biases.

To enhance the *trustworthiness* of this case study, I took the following steps as advised by Miles and Huberman (1994), Merriam (2001), and Marshall and Rossman (2006):

(1) **Prolonged engagement** with the same participants: Data were gathered over four semesters focusing on the same writing phenomena, which can increase the credibility (internal validity) of the findings.

(2) **Triangulation**: In this study, data were collected from multiple sources including questionnaires, participant diaries, in-depth interviews and documents of various kinds. Marshall and Rossman (2006:202) describe triangulation as "the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point", which not only helps to reduce biases but also, perhaps more importantly, enables researchers to have a more "holistic understanding" of the situation in order to construct "plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied" (Mathison, 1988:17, as quoted in Merriam 2001:204). Triangulation of data sources can enhance credibility.

(3) **Member checks**: Soon after every interview, I wrote up interview notes (on average 1000 words per interview) capturing the essence of the interviews. The notes were given to the participants for checking of accuracy and completeness before the next interview.

This was done throughout the study to ensure that I had faithfully captured and interpreted their perspective of reality. My background as a member of the *Chartered Institute of Linguists*, a leading professional language body in the UK, enabled me to be professionally accurate in translating the interview recordings from Cantonese into English. (Note: For admission as a member of the Institute, the person has to pass a public examination which consists of several modules that assess his/her proficiency in two languages, one of which must be English. My qualifying languages are English and Chinese.)

(4) **Audit trail:** Detailed descriptions and documentation of data collection and analysis were made in this paper to allow readers to see the connections between data and findings. The trackability of all stages of data collection and analysis can enhance dependability.

(5) **Researcher's position:** As mentioned in section 3.4, both my undergraduate and post graduate studies are in the field of business administration, and this allowed me a better understanding of the nature of the marketing discipline. Also, my MA (in English for Specific Purposes) dissertation was in the area of business discourse. My knowledge and background in the business discipline would allow me to make better sense of the data collected in this study. I have been a university ESP (English for Specific Purposes) lecturer for many years, but the participants in this study were not my students; they participated in this study in response to my invitation as explained in section 3.5.1.

As discussed in section 3.2, one of the philosophical assumptions of the interpretive paradigm is that interpretations are inevitably influenced by the researcher's background and values; thus it is almost impossible to conduct totally objective and value free research. Making the researcher's background transparent can help readers better understand how data were interpreted in the ways they were.

3.10 Ethical issues

Bulmer (2001:45) points out succinctly that “ethics is a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others”. Qualitative research literature (e.g., Bulmer, 2001; Burgess, 1989, 1994a; Busher, 2002; Cohen et al, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Walford, 2001) discusses many of the ethical issues which can arise in different stages of qualitative studies and makes suggestions to deal with the issues. Based on some of their suggestions, especially Cohen et al (2000) and Busher (2002), I drew up the following principles to which I strictly adhered in this study:

Informed consent before and during data collection

- Purposes of research are disclosed and explained to participants as fully as possible.
- They know exactly what they will be expected to do and the extent to which they will be involved in the research process such as time, effort and provision of documents.
- Their participation in the research is *strictly voluntary* and they have *the right and freedom* to opt out of the study at any time without any obligations.
- They are guaranteed that prior consent from them must be sought if, at any stage, data collection would involve other people related to their studies in general and assignment writing activities in particular (such as their lecturers/professors).

Protection of participants in reporting findings

- The anonymity and confidentiality of participants are protected in such a way that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their real identity. In this regard, the name of their university is also not mentioned, directly or indirectly, in this thesis.

Protection of data collected

- At the end of this study, all the data including audio files, diaries, and documents collected from them will be kept in a secure place and only the researcher will be

able to access them for solely scholarly use. The participants at any time can ask for their return or their destruction.

The participants in this study were undergraduates in their early twenties; they should be mature enough to make an informed decision. A formal informed consent statement, which spells out clearly the principles mentioned above, was drawn up. Before the commencement of this study, the two participants read the statement and I also explained its content again in Cantonese (their mother tongue). They then signed the statements indicating their willingness to participate in the research (a copy of the informed consent statement is in Appendix A). After the pilot study which was conducted in the first semester of 2004/2005, I believed that I had gained their trust and we established a kind of friendship in that they were very willing to share with me, as a sympathetic friend, the pain and joy of their assignment writing processes. This was perhaps the main reason why they maintained their participation for two years (until they graduated) without dropping out, which occurs quite frequently in longitudinal studies (see, for example, Prior, 1998). Because of such trust and friendship, I believe that the diary entries and answers given to me in the interviews were candid and thus reliable.

In order to collect data from as many sources as possible, I originally planned to observe lectures relating to the assignments I chose to study and interview the professors marking their assignments (see sections 3.7.3 and 3.7.4). However, I dropped the plan because I sensed that the participants showed a certain degree of reluctance when I was discussing my plan with them. They told me in a subtle way that they did not feel comfortable when I was present in their lectures and that they felt uneasy about the involvement with their professors even though I guaranteed I would never ever disclose their names. This is an example of my strict adherence to the principles I drew up for this study. As Stake mentions, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Stake, 1994:244, as quoted in Merriam, 2001:214). As a guest in the private spaces of the two participants, I was very sensitive to the feelings of my hosts and strictly followed the code of ethics.

CHAPTER 4

The Disciplinary and Social Contexts

4.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to address the first research question restated below.

Research question 1: What are the disciplinary, institutional and local contexts in which non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their writing tasks?

As Meinhof and Richardson (1994) remark, the meanings of context vary a great deal depending on how large one draws the circle; it can range from a global social structure (a big circle) to a more immediate social situation (a smaller circle). For the purpose of this study, context is limited to (1) the disciplinary context (i.e. the marketing discipline), (2) the institutional context (i.e. the university and the department in which this study was situated), and (3) the local or immediate context inhabited by the participants as discussed in chapter 2 of this paper. This chapter starts with describing and analysing how academics and marketing professionals define and explain the marketing discipline. It is then followed by a description and discussion of the institutional context, particularly the aims and structure of the marketing programme as well as the departmental criteria for assessing students' written assignments. Finally, I describe and discuss the participants' local context as revealed from the data gathered.

4.2 The disciplinary context: marketing discipline

Marketing is widely regarded as an *applied discipline* in the sense that it is very closely related to the business functions and activities of organisations. Its strong emphasis on applications in the real business world is evident in the ubiquitous case studies of real organisations found in almost all marketing textbooks (e.g., Armstrong & Kotler, 2007; Etzel, Walker & Stanton, 2001; Jobber, 2007; Kerin, Steven & Rudelius, 2007; Kurtz & Boone, 2006; Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2008). To conceptualise the

marketing discipline, this section reviews the nature and scope of marketing as perceived and put forward by the marketing disciplinary community including academics and marketing professionals.

4.2.1 The nature of marketing

Although as early as in 1973 scholars remarked that “marketing is not easy to define” and that “no one has yet been able to formulate a clear, concise definition that finds universal acceptance” (Rewoldt, Scott & Warshaw, 1973:3), marketing textbooks often start with providing their definitions of marketing in the first chapter. More recent definitions include (1) marketing is “a total system of business activities designed to plan, price, promote, and distribute want-satisfying products to target markets in order to achieve organizational objectives” (Etzel, Walker & Stanton, 2001:6), (2) marketing is “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods, services... to create and maintain relationships that will satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (Kurtz & Boone, 2006:7), (3) marketing is “a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging value with others” (Armstrong & Kotler, 2007:5), (4) “Marketing exists through exchanges... The modern marketing concept can be expressed as: The achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding customer needs and expectations better than the competition” (Jobber, 2007:4-5), (5) marketing is “a process that focuses on delivering value and benefits to customers, not just selling goods, services, and/or ideas. It uses communication, distribution, and pricing strategies to provide customers and other stakeholders with the goods, services... they desire when and where they want them” (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2008:6).

The American Marketing Association (AMA), one of the largest associations for marketing professionals with 38,000 members worldwide, defines marketing as “an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” in their website (Definition of marketing, para.2).

Drawing together the definitions provided by academics and marketing professionals would allow us to conceptualise what marketing is concerned with. The core of marketing as a discipline is the management of *creating* and *exchanging value* between product/service providers (business enterprises or non-profit making organisations) and their target customers (individuals or organisations) with the purpose of satisfying customers' needs and wants as well as achieving the providers' goals. It is a *system* because "all marketing activities in an organisation should be coordinated" (Etzel, Walker & Stanton, 2001:10). It is also a *process* because it involves the process of (1) understanding the *current situation* of the organisation (e.g. its goals/objectives, resources and capabilities) and environment (i.e. marketplace and customers/consumers) in which the organisation operates, (2) designing a *marketing strategy* to meet organisation objectives and exploit market opportunities, (3) developing *marketing programmes* to implement the strategy, and (4) *tracking* the effectiveness (in achieving the objectives) and efficiency (in terms of time and cost) of the coordinated marketing activities (Dowling, 2004). It is one of the important *organisational functions* among others such as accounting and finance; operations and logistics; human resources; and research and development.

4.2.2 The scope of marketing

Hunt (1976:19) points out that "no matter which definition of marketing one prefers, the scope of marketing is unquestionably broad". It embraces such diverse areas as:

- *Consumer/buyer behaviour* – understanding their needs and wants
- *Marketing research* – gathering information about customers, markets and external environment (demographics, political, social, economic and technological factors)
- *Market segmentation and targeting* – focusing on target markets
- *Positioning and branding* – managing the name, logo, design, features etc. to differentiate the product/service from competitors'
- *Marketing mix* – one of the major focuses of the marketing discipline and often referred to as the 4Ps – *product, price, place* and *promotion*. This relates to an organisation's decision on:

- *Product*: product-mix (breadth and depth of product offering), product line (product grouping), product life cycle and services marketing.
- *Price*: cost-plus pricing, break-even analysis, pricing strategies in different situations, etc.
- *Place*: channels of distribution (of products and services) such as retailing, wholesaling and physical distribution.
- *Promotion*: marketing communication strategies including personal selling, advertising, sales promotion, public relations and more recently e-marketing/ internet marketing.
- *Customer relationship management* – retaining the customers
- *International marketing* – marketing an organisation's products in two or more countries.
- *Ethical consideration of marketing decisions*

These are the core areas of study in the marketing discipline. Since all these areas require careful systematic planning, implementing, evaluating and monitoring, the processes are usually documented in organisations to facilitate discussion in meetings and to provide written records.

4.2.3 Marketing plan: a common written genre in the discipline

One such written document commonly produced in the marketing profession is the *marketing plan*. It usually entails the following elements (Dowling, 2004; Kimball, 2006):

- (1) Conducting a **situational analysis**. This involves using some of the analytical frameworks such as the 4Ps (mentioned in this section), 3Cs (company, competitors and customers), BCG (Boston Consulting Group) matrix and/or SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) to identify the company's capabilities, competitive advantage and desirable customer offer.
- (2) Setting **objectives** of the company as a result of the situational analysis.

- (3) Crafting **marketing strategies** based on its market segmentation. This involves a strategic choice of alternative strategies such as market penetration, product development, market development and diversification.
- (4) **Budgeting**. This involves estimation of promotion cost, sales forecast and production budget.
- (5) Devising **action plans**.
- (6) Devising a **controlling/monitoring mechanism**. This is to ensure that the strategies work as planned and within budget.

The *marketing plan* seems to embody the value and practices of marketing professionals: rational, disciplined and systematic thinking; setting objectives that are achievable given the environment in which the business operates and the available resources; and crafting the right strategies to achieve the objectives within a time frame and budget.

4.3 The institutional context: studying marketing

This section presents how the concept and practices of the marketing discipline outlined in the preceding section is translated into a programme of study at the university in which this study was situated. It also illustrates, from data collected, how the participants reacted to programme and course documents that spelt out institutional notions of marketing study and its requirements.

4.3.1 The study of marketing at undergraduate level

Traditionally the main focus for an undergraduate marketing study has been on business enterprises rather than on non-profit making organisations, which seems to be more practical in terms of career prospects for students. The programme document for the undergraduate marketing programme provided by the university in which the two participants were studying shows the following structure and focuses:

Programme structure

Apart from other compulsory language and general education subjects, it starts with general business subjects, such as financial/management accounting, business law, economics, organisation management, and information technology for business. This appears to build up the fundamental knowledge of other business functions before focusing on marketing. It then moves on to, in the second and third years, marketing-specific subject areas.

Disciplinary focuses

These marketing-specific subjects all fall under the scope I outlined in section 4.2.2. These include consumer behaviour, marketing communications, marketing research, distribution management, international marketing, marketing strategy, internet marketing, services marketing, retailing and merchandising, and brand management. Probably because of institutional constraints such as time and credit points, some of the subjects are offered as electives only.

Objectives of the marketing programme

The objectives as stated in the same programme document are rather general. Briefly, the programme will provide students with “a rounded business and marketing education”, which ties in well with the programme structure outlined above. It also mentions “competence in the analysis, planning, implementation and control of marketing decisions”, which generally encompasses the nature of marketing as discussed in section 4.2 above. Individual marketing subjects have their own course documents or syllabi given to students before or in the first lesson (increasingly through web CT from which students can download the documents). These documents usually start with the course objectives/purposes and learning outcomes. The objective and outcome statements have similar textual structures across all subjects. The objective/purpose statement usually starts with: “This course has the following aims” or “The course aims at...” followed by a list of statements in points or sentences. The outcome statements have the following structure: “As a result of this course/on successfully completing this subject, students will be able to...” followed by a list of bullet points starting with an action word. For the

subject *Distribution Management*, as an example, there are four bullet points: “(1) develop an understanding of what distribution management is and its role in commerce, (2) develop their skills as a manager in assimilating this knowledge in planning, implementing and monitoring a range of logistics function, (3) develop their abilities to solve the range of problems... in respect to logistics and distribution management, (4) enhance their personal and professional success by becoming a more effective communicator about contemporary logistics issues.” Comparing the objectives with the outcomes, the former is rather general while the latter is more specific. The participants, Joan and Susan, mentioned in their interviews that these statements did not mean much to them and they seldom read these statements, which to them existed as more a formality than necessity. Generally, the common features of the objectives and outcomes across the subjects are (1) to develop an understanding of the particular subject and students’ abilities to solve a range of problems relating to this subject area, and (2) to analyse, plan, implement, monitor or evaluate a range of functions relating to the subject area. This follows quite closely with the nature of marketing as discussed in section 4.2.

4.3.2 The assessment criteria

One of the key objectives (if not the only objective) of students completing their assignments, according to Susan and Joan, is to obtain a good grade or at least a pass grade. The university-wide assessment system of the university in which this study took place has been based on ‘**criteria referencing**’, which means there are criteria set for individual subject and specific assignment. However, there are some general guidelines at the **faculty level**, which are given to students both in electronic and paper format.

The general criteria for the grades

According to these general criteria at faculty level (obtained from the participants), ‘C’ grades (i.e. ‘C’ and ‘C+’) are described as ‘satisfactory’. Although there is no mention of whether ‘C’ is a pass grade in this document, it is widely known among students and teachers that ‘C’ grades are almost the lowest ‘pass’ grade. ‘D’ grades are widely known as the so-called ‘marginal pass’, which students perceive as near fail. This document sets forth the criteria for ‘C’ grades as:

- **Address the task** as set
- Display a **basic understanding** of the concepts
- **Use the materials provided** to you by the tutor in ways which are relevant
- Display **no major errors** of understanding

If the assignments do not meet these criteria, students will get ‘D’ grades and below (an ‘F’ i.e. fail grade).

To achieve ‘B’ grades (i.e. ‘B’ or ‘B+’), students are required to display good ‘relational understanding’ which, according to the document, requires:

- Using a range of **source materials** beyond those provided by the tutor
- Using a diversity of **source materials** (the Web, newspapers, magazines, case studies, interviews with managers in the real business world)
- Using these materials to (a) **explain** the main ideas, (b) **analyse** and **relate** the different components, and (c) **compare, contrast** and **apply** the ideas
- Proper **referencing**

To achieve ‘A’ grades, students have to go beyond the qualities of ‘B’ grades to ‘extended ideas’ which is explained in the document as “*difficult to describe* but *may involve*” (my emphasis) the following qualities:

- Seeing the issues from a different angle
- Having an element of originality
- Reflecting your own ‘voice’ and opinions
- Theorizing, hypothesizing, recommending or reflecting

Subject-specific criteria: degree of explicitness

Individual subjects have a wide range of explicitness in describing assessment criteria for their writing tasks, from complete absence of criteria to very detailed grade descriptors as shown in the table below:

Subject*	Assessment criteria for the writing task as stated in the course document: the extent to which they are detailed and specific
Internet Marketing	4 short phrases (1 to 3 words) each with corresponding percentage of weighting (e.g. Practicality 3%; organisation of ideas 2% etc. that make up a total of 10%). No description of criteria for each grade and no explanations of what 'practicality' etc. means.
Distribution Management	No assessment criteria. Only short descriptions of weighting of 'content' (50%) and 'writing style and organisation' (50%). No description of criteria for each grade. No explanations of what the requirements of 'content' are and what 'writing style' is appropriate.
International Marketing	Detailed assessment criteria with descriptors for each grade (A, B, C and D/fail grades) similar to the general criteria at the faculty level as presented above.
Marketing Strategy	No assessment criteria.

Table 4.1: Assessment criteria for specific writing tasks

**This study investigated 4 subjects which had at least one relatively long written assignment as part of the assessments.*

Data from the interviews show that the participants did not pay any attention to the faculty level assessment criteria; however, detailed subject assessment criteria or the "marking scheme" provided by individual lecturers *played an important role* in their task representation and the way they constructed their texts.

Susan: The report was basically structured around the marking scheme given though not in the exact order (Interview number 4).

Joan: We heavily rely on the assessment criteria in the course document and the marking scheme given to us later to find out what we should include in our assignment (Interview number 12).

Joan: The 'break even point' requirement was not explicitly stated by Paul [the lecturer], but almost all classmates knew this requirement from the criteria in the course document and included it in their assignments (Interview number 13).

Closely examining and carefully interpreting the assessment criteria to select the content and structure their texts is one of the strategies they employed to represent the task and meet the reader's expectation, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next two chapters. The absence of explicit criteria, as will be discussed in the next chapter, made their task representation more difficult.

4.3.3 Group writing assessment

Almost all subjects in Susan and Joan's department followed the pattern of 50% continuous assessment plus 50% examinations and tests. Continuous assessment consisted of oral presentations and written assignments. For written assignments, the majority of them, almost 90%, were done in groups. I attended a workshop organised by the university's education development centre (see explanation in section 3.7.3 in chapter 3). This workshop provided a chance for professors/lecturers from different faculties, including the business faculty (in which this study was situated), to discuss and explore issues related to grading students' group projects. Information collected from the workshop showed that the reasons for using group work as the dominant written assessment mode were:

1. Workload consideration

Often one professor or lecturer has to lead a class of 140 to 150 students. Requiring students to undertake written assignments in groups of five or six greatly reduces the marking load from 150 papers down to around 30 depending on the group size.

2. Pedagogical consideration

- (a) Students can learn from each other through group member interactions, and
- (b) Group work mirrors the situation in their future workplace, where team work is common.

Problems associated with grading students' group work, as acknowledged by the professors, were:

1. Some students ("free riders" as the professors called them) do not contribute or make little effort in group work and yet they receive the same grade as other members since one grade is given to the whole group based on their written work. This raises the issue of fairness of grading.
2. Many students tend to choose the peers they know well or like most to form their groups resulting in some grievances from students who cannot form groups with the ones they prefer.

Solutions used by the professors to cope with the problems included:

1. Using peer and self-evaluations in which group members evaluate others' and their own contributions by completing a 'peers evaluation' form. This is intended to identify "free riders" for consideration of grade adjustment. But as Susan and Joan, the two participants in this study, pointed out this did not work as intended because members usually collaborated with each other in the evaluations.
2. Group members are assigned by professors at random, which could be by alphabetical order of students' names or by seating proximity. As my data revealed, often professors allowed students to form groups by themselves but in circumstances where some students, for some reason, were left alone, the professors had no choice but to assign these students to groups with an insufficient number of members. This created problems for students like Susan (see section 4.4.1 for details).

4.4 The immediate/local contexts

As discussed in chapter 2 of this paper, scholars and researchers (e.g. Witte, 1992; Chin, 1994; Belcher & Braine, 1995; Casanave, 1995; Prior, 2004) have pointed out that in situated studies of writing it is essential to look into the immediate, local contexts which participants occupy and in which they interact with others in the process of producing their assignments. Based on the data collected, this section will describe such contexts which are categorised in this study as participants' *personal* and *interpersonal* domains.

4.4.1 Personal domain

Personal domain includes (1) physical environment (such as places, dates and times in which the task-related reading and writing activities take place), (2) beliefs and knowledge about academic writing, (3) learning from group work, (4) attitude towards group work, (5) attitude towards assignment writing, and (6) workload.

Physical environment

Both participants belonged to rather typical Hong Kong middle-class families where they lived in flats of multi-storey residential buildings. The average area of a flat with 2 to 3 bed rooms is in the region of 400 to 600 square feet. Although Susan had her own room (which is an exception rather than a norm by Hong Kong standards), she preferred to work in the campus computer centre where there were internet connected computers and laser printers:

Susan: Most of my writing, except a small part like the introduction, was done in the CC [Computer Centre]. I find it more efficient working in the CC. At home, though I have my own room and no one will disturb me, there are too many distractions, such as taking a nap, having something to nibble, and surfing the internet of my favourite sites. Working in the CC makes me feel that I have to get things done and go home as early as possible (Interview number 5).

Susan usually started to tackle the assignment much earlier than Joan to avoid the last minute rush but sometimes she had to work until midnight or early in the morning. For example, when she tackled the *Distribution Management* (DM) assignment, an individual

writing task (due date: 24 March 2005), she started as early as on 7 March. Thus, she was able to finish it the day before the due date of submission without having to work through the night. However, she could not always adhere to this relatively well-planned working schedule, especially when the tasks involved group work.

On the other hand, although Joan had to share her room with her younger brother, she found it more productive to work at home. She did sometimes work in the campus CC especially when she had to search for information and to print out the hard copies of assignments for submission. It seems that she enjoyed the more relaxing environment at home where she could watch TV while working on the writing tasks as shown in her diary entry on 31 Oct 2004:

Joan: I'm writing [the business report] and watching football [on TV] at the same time, which makes writing less boring and thinking less hard (Diary 04/05 S2).

Also, she often worked at midnight or early in the morning when most people were sleeping, which perhaps explains why home was her main place of doing assignments:

Joan: On that evening [20 Feb] I was so tired that I slept for 3 hours and got up at 11 pm to start to work again... That night I worked until 5 am [21 Feb] and went to bed till I woke up again at around 10 am (Interview number 14).

Joan usually started to do her assignment a few days before the due day. For the same *Distribution Management* assignment, she started to tackle the assignment just 4 days before the due day and finished it at 3:45 am on the due day (Diary 04/05 S2).

Beliefs and knowledge about academic writing

Susan had some understanding of some characteristics of academic writing. For example, she believed that what she wrote should be based on sources rather than her own common sense or personal opinion but she could not recall when and how she acquired such knowledge.

Susan: [Referring to the International Marketing assignment]... finally I got some information about population density in London, which of course is the highest in UK. I then selected London to be the city for export... Although I know clearly

that of course London has the highest population density, I still need to get data to support my screening [to screen out cities or countries for exporting the products] (Interview number 4)...[Referring to the Marketing Strategy assignment]...For example, air pollution and stress, from our common senses, will no doubt adversely affect people's skin conditions...however... we should look for evidence to support such 'common senses'...(Interview number 7)

This knowledge to some extent made her writing more convincing in academic discourse as the following excerpt from her *Marketing Strategy* assignment shows:

Air Pollution

According to Hong Kong Air Pollution Index (API), the air quality is always keeping in the level of very high on the street (Please refer to appendix 6) and from the Chinatime states that Chlorofluorocarbons (CFC) would be released from the air-conditioning, refrigerator; it would let people skin turning dull, darker and wrinkles...

Working Stress

It is normal for people work under heavy stress in Hong Kong. Bases on the research Occupational Safety and Health Council Stress and... it stated that stress not just only bring the psychological side effects¹, but also it will worsen the skin and easily to look elder and elder².

Figure 4.1 Excerpt from Susan's *Marketing Strategy* assignment

Joan, on the other hand, believed that it was all right to write something based on her own "general knowledge" without any support from empirical data. This belief and knowledge of academic writing seem to make her writing lack the kind of cogent argument expected in academic discourse:

Joan: What we wrote in this section [referring to section 2 of the *Marketing Strategy* assignment reproduced in figure 4.2 below] is based on our general knowledge and did not come from any sources, like survey reports etc. Actually, we know that there are many different types of ladies' skin care products, but very few for men. (Interview number 14)

We can find that ladies always use many different skin care products, like cleaning foam, toner, essence, moisture, make-up base etc. Ladies don't mind to do many steps on the skin care, they like to specialize different product. For example, use brand A toner, brand B essence and moisture and brand C make-up base.

In the male world, men always try to minimize the steps on skin care. They like to use all-in-one product rather than so many steps.

From this analysis, we can say that the men who use more than 5 kinds of skin care product are rare and not profitable for skin care company.

Figure 4.2 Excerpt from Joan's *Marketing Strategy* assignment

Both Susan and Joan had their own beliefs about referencing in academic writing. Even though both of them had completed the *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) course in their first year of university study (the syllabus of which covers APA reference style), it seems that they still held on their own beliefs about what referencing should be.

Susan: As for the references section [referring to her 'Marketing Strategy' assignment], we only read 2 books and used some of the ideas or terms from the books. We didn't feel it's necessary and didn't have the time to compile this section. (Interview number 6)

Joan: This sentence [referring to one sentence in section 2 of the 'Marketing Strategy' assignment] is a definition I copied from a textbook. I didn't give indication of its source because I prefer to provide [in-text] references only if I used the data, i.e. figures, from the sources no matter whether they're from the web or textbooks. And I prefer to use footnotes for this purpose. I did complete the EAP course, but I think I have forgotten the referencing skills, if there were any, in the course. (Interview number 14)

Learning from group work

They both thought that they had learned to improve their writing skills from their group mates rather than from English teachers.

Susan: I also learned a lot about writing from him [one of the group mates she worked with in an assignment]. A group mate with good English is much better than having an English teacher proofreading our writing because the teacher, who

has no idea about what we try to say, can only help us with grammar accuracy. However, a group mate with good English knows what we are doing and want to say and can thus help us far better than a teacher. (Interview number 8)

Joan: ...as I have written more project reports, I feel that I have some improvements because I have learned from other group mates who often point out the mistakes I made. Although they are students like me, I feel that their English is better than me and I can learn from them. Besides, if two or three students mention the same language errors, then they should be right and I am wrong. Through this interaction, I feel that I have some improvements over the years. (Interview number 15)

Also the group environment provides me with chances to learn from ideas of other classmates. And they can give me feedback on my writing. Through discussions, they can stimulate my thoughts. (Interview number 15)...I can learn from group mates, who could point out the errors I made but I can't see them myself... (Interview number 16)

Attitude towards group work

Susan and Joan had completely different attitudes toward group work, which had an impact on their writing processes. They both knew well the reasons (as presented in the last section) why almost 90% of their written assignments were done in groups and they had sympathy with the workload of the professors. Susan did not like group work in written assignments mainly because (1) she found it difficult to work with classmates who were not her good friends, (2) it was a daunting task to make the writing coherent and (3) it was inefficient, as revealed in her interviews:

Susan: ...group writing poses a serious problem of incoherence or inconsistency in terms of the quality of writing or even content...Different parts of the report often do not link, and it's easier to tell they're written by different writers...Yes, this problem can be minimised if someone in the group does the final editing or integrating work, but editing is a daunting task which is often skipped because of the shortage of time and in meeting deadlines.

...individual writing is more efficient than group writing. Apart from the discussions and negotiations of work division, which are often time consuming, time is often wasted in waiting for group mates' completion of their parts...
(Interview number 8)

By contrast, Joan preferred working in a group because as mentioned in the preceding section she felt that she could learn from her group mates and also:

Joan: I prefer to work in a group mainly because I have a sense of responsibility in a group. If I do it individually, I'd put less effort because the lower grade would only affect me. But for a group project, the lower grade would affect everyone.
(Interview number 13)

Given the choice, I'd still prefer to do group assignments, which are usually of a larger scale compared with individual ones. Assignments of larger scale provide me chances to learn more. (Interview number 15)

Furthermore, she felt more secure working in a group than working individually as she said "I'm very worried about whether I've got the points right [if I work on my own]"
(Interview number 9)

Apart from personality, their different attitudes may be related to their interpersonal skills or the lack thereof, which will be presented and discussed in the next section that deals with the interpersonal domain.

Attitude towards assignment writing

Both Susan and Joan had more or less similar attitudes towards assignment writing. They had a rather practical, straightforward objective: complete an assignment and get a pass or better grade, as Susan said, "so that we don't have to retake it". The strongest motivator that pushed them to work on the assignments was the submission deadline, as Joan said "the only thing that drove me to get up in the middle of the night to work on the assignment is the deadline". For Joan, another motivator to finish the assignments as soon as possible was the free time to play online games, as shown on one

of her diary entries “1 Mar 06, 21:00 at home – start writing reflective essay – have to finish as soon as possible; wanted to play online games; this is my driving force.” (Diary 05/06 S2)

From their experiences, both Susan and Joan perceived that most professors or lecturers did not actually read their entire reports; instead they would simply flip through the reports to get an impression. Based on this impression and their knowledge of the students’ past performance, professors/lecturers allocated grades with a certain pattern of grade distribution: a few students got As, the majority of students got Bs and some students Cs. Susan felt that “it’s so easy for those lecturers to give grades...they’re so ‘skin-deep’ [which means they didn’t go into the depth of the reports]”. This probably was the reason why the feedback on their assignments was mostly minimal or simply a few ticks with no written comments (see also next section). Some assignments were never returned; students only found out their grades after the subject results were finalised and released to students. This attitude and perception have affected their coping strategies, which will be described and discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

Workload

The workload, especially towards the end of the semester when assignments from different subjects were due, had impinged on both Susan and Joan’s written work. On average, they took 5 to 6 subjects every semester in order to accumulate 90 credits for graduation.

Joan: A highly structured course – with detailed schedule of when to do this and do that – like this one [referring to the ‘International Marketing’] is good.

However, we had very heavy workload not only from this course but from some other courses... which makes it almost impossible for us to have a well planned schedule to do the assignment. We basically are driven by the deadlines: do whatever closed to the deadlines...And towards the latter part of the project, as there were more deadlines of other courses coming up, we found it painful and agonizing to sleep just a few hours every night to work on the project...we had to deal with 3 or 4 assignments every week. So it’s rather stressful for us...If we had

fewer subjects to do in the semester and we had more time to do this project, I think I'd enjoy it more... (Interview number 13)

4.4.2 Interpersonal domain

Interpersonal domain includes (1) interactions with group mates (for group writing tasks), and (2) interactions with professors.

Interactions with group mates

Closely related to Susan's attitude towards group work, her interaction with group mates was perhaps the main cause of distress in her writing processes. There were many instances of disagreement over issues such as allocating tasks among her group mates and she usually ended up doing most of the work. Such frustrations were evident both in her diary entries and interviews. This may further strengthen her negative attitudes towards group work as shown in section 4.4.1. Some extracts of her interviews and diary entries illustrate her frustrations:

Susan: ...the main difficulty I encountered in doing this assignment was conflict and discord within the group...we had a lot of disagreements on dividing up work, and we had a completely different working style, and a lot of time and energy had been wasted in dealing with these disagreements... (Interview number 4)

...the other 3 boys in my group thought it's not worthwhile to put in so much effort and their attitude was rather passive...They won't join us to meet Paul [the professor] this afternoon. So basically we did most of the work in this project." (Interview number 3)

...such disunity started to surface a few days ago when on one occasion they asked why I had to take charge of the project, and I explained to them this was not my intention. I just played the role of kind of overall-in-charge because they appeared to be not very clear about what to do, so I had to decide the right thing to do and then allocate tasks such as information search. Finally, I did tell them some parts of their writing were superfluous...and asked them to delete or amend them, but they refused... (Interview number 4)

5 Nov (Sat) after dinner – sent email to group mates [asking them] to formulate interview questions [to prepare for an interview with the company director for the project] – only 2 group mates [out of 5] replied – DEPRESSING! – called group mates to find out who would go to the interview – DEPRESSING! – only one was available. (Extract from Susan’s diary entry on 5 Nov 2005 when she was doing the ‘International Marketing’ project.)

16 Nov (Wed) midnight – integrating the different parts [of the writing] from group mates – their work was...terrible! – don’t know what to tell them, a headache! (Extract from Susan’s diary entry on 16 Nov 2005 when she was doing the ‘International Marketing’ project.)

It is quite clear from her interviews and diary entries that Susan believed that her genre knowledge in project reports was better than her group mates and thus often took charge of the project. This was perhaps the reason why her group mates sometimes found her rather bossy in the group. She was in fact aware of her group mates’ feelings and tried not to push too far as she said “when I received those parts from group mates, I found that their work was poorly done... Although I’d like to edit their work, I didn’t do it because I was afraid that they might think that I was challenging them. Actually, I’d rather do it all by myself...” (Interview number 4) Her experience and relationship with her group mates can explain why she had a negative attitude towards group work.

By contrast, Joan had a harmonious relationship with her group mates (even though some of them were apparently “free riders” as described in section 4.3.3), which made her enjoy group work. This is perhaps mainly due to her good interpersonal skills and positive mental attitude in working with people as she said:

I think interpersonal skills are important in doing group assignments. If one is weak in such skills, it will make her very difficult to complete the assignment not to mention enjoy doing it. The group projects provide me with the training to deal with difficult people. (Interview number 15)

Discussions with group mates play an important role. Our discussions are all about sharing of information obtained and direction of the paper. Sometimes we sidetrack to talk about something not related to the project, but it’s fun and

relaxing. That's one of the reasons why I like group assignments. (Interview number 16)

Interactions with professors

Interactions with professors or lecturers teaching the subjects refer to the communications (with students) that took place outside lecture halls or classrooms. Data from this study revealed that such interactions were mainly of two types: face-to-face consultations and written feedback on their assignments. All academic staff members in this university are required to provide face-to-face consultation to students on a need-to-consult basis. In practice, different staff members carry it out in different ways; some set aside some fixed schedule, e.g. two hours every Monday afternoon, to meet students, while some see students only by appointment through email. However, the practice of written feedback on assignments varies a great deal among teaching staff as revealed by Susan and Joan.

Consultation

The consultations that Susan and Joan had with their professors were only for the purpose of seeking help with their assignments. While they viewed help from professors in their assignments as important, they sometimes did not make use of the consultations because they could not contact the professors. If they did, they did not find the consultations useful and Joan expected something more.

Susan: ...through consultation, teachers can provide us with direction – whether we are going in the right direction. For each assignment we normally can have 1 to 2 consultations. (Interview number 8)

We didn't use any consultations even though we had problems in doing this assignment because he's [the professor] hard to find. He always said he was busy and often went on trips (Interview number 6).

...not much help from Paul [the professors]; he only kept repeating 'don't panic' without offering any useful help...(Interview number 4).

Joan: We, five of us, all girls, went to see Paul [the professor] on 9 November to find out how we can understand more about market screening [part of the assignment]; the meeting lasted around 30 minutes, which was the only consultation we had for this subject. But it's not at all helpful in our understanding. (Interview number 12)

...the consultation is important, but their help is only confined to content and direction [of the assignment], and nothing on grammar and other writing skills (Interview number 16).

Written feedback

Both Susan and Joan found written feedback very important in their learning; however, they both were *disappointed*, even *frustrated*, with the minimal feedback on their assignments from their professors. Assignments submitted near the end of the semester were usually not returned to them. The only professor who gave them by far the most detailed handwritten feedback was, however, almost illegible to them. They both expected feedback not only on content but also on their language because they believed that this could help improve their writing skills.

Susan: In terms of writing, the feedback from teachers is important in improving both content and writing...organisation and grammar, for example. But only a few teachers gave detailed feedback...(Interview number 7)

I had my feedback sheet [the sheet of A4 size paper attached to her assignment] from Paul [the professor]... I found it difficult to read, because the handwriting of foreigners is often difficult to read and I have to guess the meanings if I can't read them. (Interview number 3)

The thing I don't like is the lack of feedback from teachers... feedback is rare as far as written assignments are concerned. Most assignments were not even returned to us, except Paul's one [referring to 'International Marketing']...(Interview number 8)

Joan: The feedback on this assignment is next to nothing, which I don't like. I feel that he [the professor] was not serious. I've put in so much time and effort in

writing the assignment and I'd expect at least some simple comments on my strengths and weaknesses... (Interview number 9)

The assignment feedback from teachers is usually minimal and seldom touches on language, except the report selected for taking part in an external competition when it will be edited by the professor... (Interview number 15)

[Feedback from professors is] very important. But very rare...from professors. So I count on group mates to give me feedback and point out mistakes I may have made...Over the past 3 years, only one or two assignments were returned with useful feedback from professors. Most of the feedback is, however, about content, not grammar. Only on the rare occasions where our assignments, I mean the business plan, were selected to enter into a competition outside the campus would professors help us to correct grammatical errors. (Interview number 16)

4.5 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I have described and discussed the disciplinary and social contexts in which Susan and Joan produced their written assignments. The analysis of how academics and marketing professionals conceptualise and describe marketing as a discipline has shown the core value and practices of marketing. Unlike other academic subjects, its emphasis is on application, i.e. applying the rational and systematic thinking to analyse situations faced by an organisation, then planning, crafting and implementing strategies to achieve the organisation's goals. Marketing is often considered as one of the most important functions of a business. According to Drucker (1974), widely regarded as the founder of modern management as a profession, marketing is one of the two basic functions of a business (the second being innovation) that generates results or, simply put, profits; the other functions are just costs. To record and communicate the activities of this function, marketing professionals commonly use a written genre known as a 'marketing plan' with an identifiable generic structure as presented in section 4.2.3. This written genre to a certain extent encapsulates the major concerns of the marketing professionals. For the purpose of this study, I have described the *disciplinary context*, the outermost ring in figure 4.3, in which the participants studied and undertook their writing tasks.

This chapter has also portrayed the *institutional context*, one of the inner rings in figure 4.3. Specifically, I focus on how marketing as a business function is translated into a programme of study in the university in which this study took place. Based on documents collected from the Marketing Department and from the two participants, I have identified the programme structure, focuses, objectives and assessment criteria. It was found that the programme closely mirrored the nature and scope of marketing as described in section 4.2. This could mean that the programme was designed to introduce to students the fundamental concept of marketing as one of the important functions in organisations and its major elements and concerns. In other words, this academic programme can be seen as seeking to initiate students into a process of “enculturation” (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991; Currie, 1993) into the marketing professional community through activities such as lectures, tutorials, reading, writing, and undertaking projects. As Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:58) point out, the lines between academia and commerce are blurred. In fact, it is common to find that many professors in business faculties, especially those who teach in prestigious business schools, have either set up their own consultancy firms or regularly conduct executive training programmes for managers of large corporations. In terms of discourse community, academics in business faculties may have what Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson called “hybrid membership” (1999:7): members of both academic and business communities. One of the characteristics of such “hybrid membership” can be seen in the assignment tasks and the expectations of the professors in such tasks (details will be presented in the next chapter).

Within the intuitional context, it was found that the assessment criteria had two levels: faculty (general) and subject (specific). As described in section 4.3.2, the former were phrased in such a general and abstract way that it would be very difficult for students to interpret; this was probably the reason why both participants did not pay any attention to them. The latter had a range of explicitness and were the important sources for the participants’ task interpretation.

Another important element in the institutional context is the high percentage of group writing tasks because of two main reasons as described in section 4.3.3. I have also

identified the problems faced by professors in managing group tasks and their coping strategies. This means that the professors themselves noticed the kind of problems stemmed from group projects but the workload situation per se made it almost impracticable to allow for individual or paired work even though this could be more desirable. They, however, may not know or have the time to look into the social interactions within groups, which could have an impact not only on students' writing processes and written products but also on their learning experiences. Also, Joan and Susan felt that they had learned from their group mates (especially writing skills). This seems to support one of Brophy's (2001) generic features of good teaching: *cooperative learning*, which states that "students often benefit from working in pairs or small groups to construct understandings or help one another master skills" (Brophy, 2001, as cited in Gall et al, 2007:5). One of the potential problems, however, could be that students like Joan and Susan might feel that they had learned writing skills from other group mates who, they thought, were better writers, whereas in fact these group mates were to a large extent still 'novice' writers perhaps with relatively better control of grammar. Without detailed feedback from 'expert' writers either from their professors or English teachers, their perceived improvement may not be real.

Based on the data from interviews and diary entries, I have also described and discussed the local contexts inhabited by the participants during their study in general and their assignment writing in particular (the ring next to the inner core "writers" in figure 4.3). This provides a more detailed account of the physical environment in which they wrote; their beliefs and knowledge about writing; attitudes toward group work and assignment writing; workload; and interactions with group mates and professors. These all had various degree of influence on their writing processes, which will be described and discussed in detail in the following chapters. Of specific interests are their beliefs and knowledge about academic writing, which were found to have direct impact on their disciplinary writing as evidenced in their ways of constructing their arguments in their assignments. Susan's knowledge that what she writes should be based on sources makes her assignments more convincing in academic discourse while Joan's relative lack of such knowledge makes her writing not as convincing. Another interesting finding is that both

Joan and Susan had completed their mandatory EAP courses, which covered referencing skills, but they had little idea of what proper in-text referencing should be as reflected in their written products and their interviews. It appears that the general EAP course had little or no impact on their disciplinary writing.

To sum up, following findings from recent case studies of situated writing and academic literacy development (e.g. Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 1995, 2002; Chin, 1994; Leki, 2007; Prior, 1995), this chapter has revealed the complexity of disciplinary and social contexts in which seemingly commonplace writing tasks for business undergraduates (the inner core in figure 4.3) were situated. In the chapters that follow I will describe and discuss in detail the writing processes of Susan and Joan within these complex contexts.

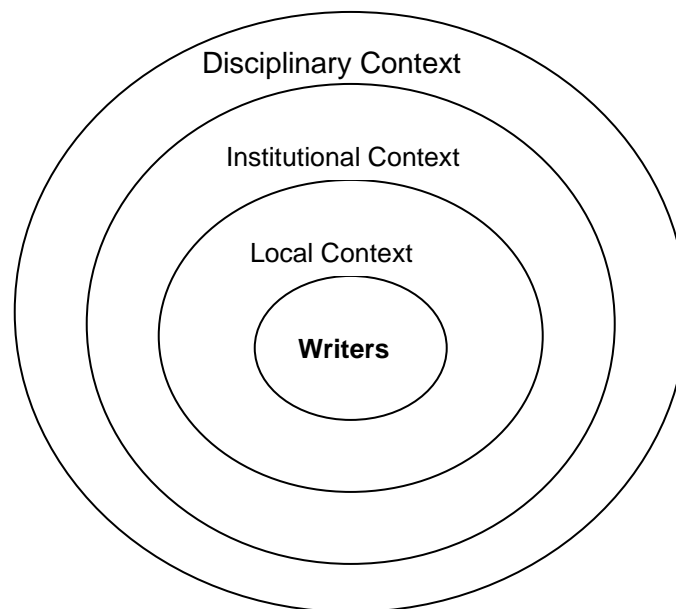


Figure 4.3 Disciplinary and social contexts in which participants (writers) undertook their writing tasks

CHAPTER 5

The Writing Processes: from Tasks to Products

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 4, I have presented and discussed the disciplinary and social contexts in which the participants in this study undertook their writing tasks. The findings show that these contexts have influenced their writing processes and their learning experiences in different ways. In this chapter I start with presenting their writing processes, from the given tasks to the final written products, based on data from this study. This will then be followed by the description and discussion of two important processes, namely *task representation* and *using sources*, which are the main focuses of the specific research questions 2 and 3:

Research question 2: How do they interpret writing tasks?

Research question 3: What are the sources they use and how do they use such sources in producing their writing tasks?

5.2 The writing processes

The primary research questions this study seeks to address is: **How do non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their assessed writing tasks?** Data gathered from this study suggest that the two participants went through nine essential writing processes. These processes, as depicted in their abbreviations below, were generally linear in that some processes had to be completed first before progressing to the next processes; for example, they had to interpret the task requirements before they could proceed to *setting direction* and *allocating task* in group projects. Also, some of the processes, for example, *task representation* and *information searching*, could recur throughout the entire writing processes (see section 5.2.9).

**GIVEN TASK ► TRP → SDR → TAL → SCI → PLN → DRF → CIP →
PFR+FCH ► FINAL PRODUCT**

where

- TRP = Task representation
- SDR = Setting direction
- TAL = Task allocation (for group work)
- SCI = Searching for and collecting information
- PLN = Planning/Outlining
- DRF = Drafting
- CIP = Collecting and integrating parts (for group work)
- PFR = Proofreading
- FCH = Final checking

These processes can be categorised and grouped into the three traditional *stages* (e.g. Zamel, 1983):

1. PREWRITING involves the following processes: TRP, SDR, TAL, SCI and PLN.
2. WRITING involves DRF and CIP.
3. REVISING involves PFR and FCH.

Data from this study reveal that these stages were not linear but recursive and sometimes happened concurrently; for example, revising often took place while writing (see section 5.2.6) and the participants would move back to search for more information (prewriting) when writing. Each process of the three stages is described below.

5.2.1 Task representation

Task representation was always the first one the participants went through in their writing processes. This was found to be very complex and often recursive. This process will be described in detail in the next section as an attempt to answer research question 2.

5.2.2 Setting direction

This process appeared more prominently in the group project but it also was a *decision-making process* in individual writing tasks. One of the processes at the very

early stage, the SDR closely followed task representation. It is to decide broadly which direction to go or area to focus on so that they can start their *search for information* and *task allocation* among group mates. For example:

“...Our discussion [with group mates] was all about sharing of information we’ve got and direction of the paper...” (Interview number 16 from Joan)

“...Through consultation, teachers can provide us with direction – whether we are going in the right direction.” (Interview number 8 from Susan)

From one of Susan’s diary entries:

“9 Feb [2006], 11 am in MMRC [multi-media and resources centre in the campus]
– meeting with team mates – find the direction of the project – search info about...
– we’re lost – no idea at all”. (Diary 05/06 S2)

Also, this process was highly dependent on the previous one, task representation. Any misinterpretation of the task would lead them to the wrong track. Both Joan and Susan were aware of this consequence and thus they would try to collect as much task-related information as possible before they set their direction.

5.2.3 Task allocation

Once they had initial representation of the given task and had set their direction, they proceeded to dividing up the tasks they were to do among group mates. This was one of their strategies to complete the assignment as efficiently as they could (see detail in the next chapter). For example:

“Since X [name of group mate] and I are more close to each other, we decide that I’ll do part 1 while X works on part 2. Part 3 seems to be independent, so we asked Y [name of group mate] to do this part.” (Interview number 6 from Susan)

“...on 16 Feb we decided who did which part by drawing lots.” (Interview number 14 from Joan)

Data from this study show that task allocation became a negative experience for Susan and caused her great distress. This has been described in section 4.4.2 in the preceding chapter under the heading ‘interactions with group mates’.

5.2.4 Searching for and collecting information

Once the participants had interpreted the task requirements, decided where they should go (setting direction), and divided up their work (for group tasks), they had some ideas of what information was needed for a particular task. At this stage, they started their information search from various sources, mainly the Web. Data from this study show that there were many instances of information search throughout the entire writing processes, which indicates that it is an important process for the participants. For example:

“I then started searching for information about population density and urbanization rate. But I couldn’t find urbanization rate in the web, and in the end I gave up...On Sunday I spent a lot of time from midnight to 3 or 4 am searching for information on the web but most of the information I found was useless...”
(Interview number 4 from Susan)

“10 Feb [2006], afternoon in MMRC – search info – not sure whether this is correct or not – I was lost...18 Feb 0:00 to 2:30 am at home – outline the flow of Part 1 – continue to search and read info – ...got some ideas what to write , but ...– very tired – will continue tomorrow.” (Diary 05/06 S2 from Susan)

“20 March [2005], drafting – while drafting I felt the need for more information – kept searching for information [in the Web] – discovered something new – printed it out...” (Diary 04/05 S2 from Susan)

This process will be described in greater detail in section 5.4 as an attempt to answer research question 3 relating to sources.

5.2.5 Planning/Outlining

Having collected information or data they needed for the task, they moved on to the process of planning and deciding *what* to include, i.e. the content, and *how* to present it, i.e. organisation. At this point they started to produce something on paper. Both Susan and Joan produced an outline usually in skeleton or bullet points that helped them start writing.

For Susan, “I start with an outline. My outline is full of points, which to me looks like drafts. I can’t differentiate outline from drafts. If I write in CC [Computer Centre in the campus], I simply type into the computer based on the outline. But if I write at home, which is more comfortable, I use pen and paper to write down points in greater detail while I’m reading before I type into the computer. I find writing with hands help me think.” (Interview number 8)

For Joan, “I usually start with writing a few points on a piece of paper as a kind of outline. Then I type into the computer without any drafts on paper. When I am typing I make corrections on the way. Corrections are ongoing activities.” (Interview number 16)

5.2.6 Drafting

For both Joan and Susan, the drafting was done not on paper but on computer. Based on their outlines and the collected information, they started typing into the computer. For the purpose of this study, they were asked to save these electronic drafts in separate files with dates so that I could track their changes, if any. An examination of these files revealed that drafting was a *progressive, accumulative* and *corrective* process where they not only added more paragraphs to complete the tasks but also revised what they had written so far. To illustrate this process, a comparison between the second draft (i.e. the 2nd file collected after starting to write) (figure 5.1) and the final, submitted version (figure 5.2) is shown below. The highlighted texts (in bold) show the changes (additions and revisions) made.

The whole tailor-made furniture production process can be divided **into 3 steps**:

1. The “Ming’s and Creative” designers discuss with the client about the main color, texture, and size of the furniture.
2. After the designer confirmed the furniture design with the clients, Hong Kong office will send the blueprint to Mainland Factory.
3. When the furniture **finished**, “M & C” [name of the company] logistic team will send the furniture **to the client’s home and fit it up**. Also, there is a 3-years structured warranty will be provided by “M & C”.

All of the tailor-made furniture is wooden and its raw materials are come from Indonesia. In this production process, the factory only produced same design of furniture in a very low amount. This is diseconomies of scale. Therefore, we would suggest “Ming’s & Creative” to export their furniture into foreign country by using the design that have been designed before. This can fully use the design and decrease the unit production cost. Also, it produces the furniture in a large amount can reach the economies of scale. After we had an interview with Ms. Lau, the General Manager of M & C, we found that the most potential exported product is **the bedroom storage cabinets** based on three reasons, profitable, simpleness and flexibility...

Figure 5.1 Drafting process: excerpt of 2nd draft of Joan’s *International Marketing* assignment (highlights in bold are added)

The whole tailor-made furniture production process can be divided **into 4 steps**:

1. [NO CHANGE]
2. [NO CHANGE]
3. When the furniture **semi-finish**, “M & C” logistic team will send the furniture to **Hong Kong factory for Baking Enamel**.
4. **After finish the furniture, “M & C” will send the furniture to the client’s home and fit it up**. Also, there is a 3-years structured warranty will be provided by “M & C”.

All of the tailor-made furniture is wooden and its raw materials are come from Indonesia. **From our interview with the general manager of Ming’s & Creative, the existing markets served by them are high income couples or household family. Their customers usually come from a large variety of jobs. There are seldom customers who are single coming to the shop. The price set by the company, for example, is about \$60,000 for a new housing unit with 3 bedrooms and 2 living rooms, and \$30,000-\$40,000 for an old housing unit with 3 bedrooms and 2 living rooms. The promotions adopted by the company are mainly advertisement on monthly magazine, newspaper advertisement and distributing leaflets on street. They will also join some furniture exhibition in Hong Kong. In August 2005, they even give television set to customers as a premium to gain higher sales in the exhibition.**

Export motive

In **the** production process, the factory only produced same design of furniture in a very low amount. This is diseconomies of scale...[NO CHANGE]...we found that the most potential exported product is **the multifunctional cabinets** based on three reasons, profitable, simpleness and flexibility...

Figure 5.2 Drafting process: final version of Joan’s *International Marketing* assignment (highlights in bold are added)

5.2.7 Collecting and integrating parts

This process is almost the final one for group work. Different parts written by group members were gathered and put together to make the whole report. Susan was particularly concerned about the lack of coherence for group writing tasks (which was one of the reasons why she did not like group work):

“...group writing poses a serious problem of incoherence or inconsistency in terms of the quality of writing or even content. Different parts of the report often do not link, and it’s easier to tell they were written by different writers...This problem can be minimised if someone in the group does the final editing or integrating, but editing is a daunting task which is often skipped because we’re often pressed for time to meet deadlines.” (Interview number 8)

An examination of all their final versions of group writing tasks, however, did not reveal any major problem of coherence. This could be due to their careful allocation of tasks, in which the whole task was broken down to discrete parts or sections for each group mate. Instead, one major problem for all their group writing tasks is the complete absence of a *conclusion section* that integrates all the evidence or arguments presented in different sections of the main body so that readers can see a coherent picture of how the writers arrived at the conclusion.

5.2.8 Proofreading and final checking

These were the last processes Joan and Susan went through, if they had time, before printing and submitting their work to their lecturers. These processes were almost always being carried out simultaneously. Proofreading was to check whether there were any obvious grammar and spelling mistakes, while final checking was to make sure that the format and layout were in order. This was an essential process for group work, which involved writing done by different group mates perhaps with different formats. However, if they were pressed for time, they would skip the final checking as Joan said:

“We were rather in a rush on the day of submission. We had one group mate to do the final integration of work and we didn’t have time to do the final checking.”
(Interview number 12)

“...but it depends on the time we have for group assignments. If we are in a hurry, we only proofread our own parts. If we have more time, we’d have a team mate proofread the entire paper once before submission.” (Interview number 16)

5.2.9 Summary of findings

In this section, I have described the writing processes in which the participants went through to accomplish their writing tasks. It was found that the nine main processes that the participants carried out were generally linear but some processes tended to be recursive. The findings here were consistent with the findings of previous studies on writing processes (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1982, 1983) in that the three traditional writing stages (i.e. prewriting, writing and revising) were not linear but recursive. In addition, the writing and revising stages in this study often took place concurrently. To illustrate the entire processes, I present as a sketch below (Figure 5.3) the writing processes of Susan’s *Marketing Strategy* assignment based on mainly her diary entries (9/2 means 9 February; the abbreviations are the main processes as presented earlier in this chapter).

9/2: Group meeting to find out the task requirements and the direction of the task (**TRP & SDR**)
 10/2: Searching for information (**SCI**)
 13/2: Searching for information (**SCI**) (Received email from teacher giving them ‘guidelines for the project’ & received good source materials from J [a classmate])
 14/2: Group meeting & task allocation; Susan was responsible for part 1 (**TAL**)
 16/2: Information from A [a classmate] who has another representation of task different from Susan (**TRP**)
 18/2: Started preparing an outline and typing into computer (**PLN & DRF**) ; carried on searching for information and reading (**SCI**); confused between part 1 and part 2, possibly misinterpreted the task; stop writing
 19/2: Asked K [a classmate] for advice on task specifications (**TRP**); as a result, rearrange outline (**PLN**); started information search and reading again (**SCI**); started to write again (**DRF**)
 20/2: Kept writing (**DRF**)
 21/2: Reading; kept writing (**DRF**); revising to reduce length
 22/2: Revising to reduce length; quick proofreading (**PFR**); finished task; collected and put together sections from group mates (**CIP**)
 22/2 (deadline): No time to do final checking (**FCH**); printed out the paper and submitted

Figure 5.3 A sketch of the writing processes in action

5.3 Task representation

“My own understanding of the task requirement is to look for current news of Hong Kong; any news related to *Distribution Management*, and as current as possible. The term ‘current’ perplexed us. We [Susan’s classmates and herself] thought that meant we should start to do our assignment as late as possible, but could we meet the deadline if we started late? It seems like a paradox.” (Interview number 1 from Susan)

The second specific research question this study seeks to answer is: **How do the participants interpret their given writing tasks?** Following Flower (1990), this study defines *task representation* as “an interpretative process that translates the rhetorical situation – as the writer reads it – into the act of composing” (p.35). Rhetorical situation, according to Flower (1990), includes the conventions of academic discourse, expectations of the reader and the context of the course. Three different tasks are used to describe and illustrate how the participants represented their writing tasks.

5.3.1 The case of ‘company’ versus ‘industry’: Hints needed from teacher

In an individual assignment (which is very rare in their programme of study) from the course *Distribution Management*, Joan and Susan were required to write a report of “5 to 7 typed pages (double spaced) with proper referencing”. The task instructions or specifications (that is what students are required or expected to do in their assignments) as appeared in the course document are reproduced below:

Each student is expected to find a current news article that relates directly to distribution management topics for analysis. The focus of the article should be a Hong Kong company and it may come from any news source. The analysis should describe the company and it may come from any news source. The analysis should describe the opportunity, problem or issue facing the company and recommend practical solutions or directions the company should take. Your recommendations should be supported by theory and practices presented in the coursework.

Figure 5.4: Task specifications of *Distribution Management*

As shown at the beginning of this section, Susan found the word “current” perplexing and was struggling to find out what the exact meaning was. Apart from this, she also had difficulties in applying theory in the report and was not sure whether “industry” instead of “company” was acceptable. She said in her interview:

“...we also need to apply theories as stated in the task instructions. It’s difficult because I didn’t know what theories we had learnt...and although the task instructions mentioned “company”, I wrote about industry not company, which I think is OK. I feel that he touched on the word “industry” during lessons...”

(Interview number 1)

Joan also found the task specifications not clear. She deliberately delayed doing the assignment because she wanted to keep it “current” (she started doing it just four days before the submission deadline whereas Susan started two weeks before the deadline). Similar to Susan, she also had difficulty in applying theory to the recommendations: “Although the instruction brief states that the recommendations should be supported by theory etc., I don’t care because it’s not possible to do so...” (Interview number 9).

Given the task specifications which to them were not clear, they had to rely on hints given by the teacher during lectures. Susan thought that the teacher mentioned ‘abattoir’ and ‘chicken’ as a ‘hot topic’ while Joan believed that distribution of ‘cattle’ and a local poultry company should be topical. With their own interpretations, they set out to search and collect information from the Web. Since there were no guidelines with regard to the structure of the report, they again constructed their reports based on whatever experiences they had in dealing with this particular genre. In the end, they produced reports that were totally different in their approaches and structures.

Susan’s report, entitled “*New flu safety plan – slaughter houses*”, had a 3-part structure: (1) Background, (2) Analysis, and (3) Recommendations. Joan used the title “*The conflict issue about beef supply in Hong Kong*” for her report, which had a relatively more elaborate structure: (1) Introduction, (2) News summary, (3) Company background, (4) Environmental factors, (5) Conflict, (6) Suggestion, and (7) Conclusion. With exactly

seven pages (excluding the Appendices), Joan's report adhered to the task requirements. Susan's report had eleven pages, two pages more than the expected length.

A closer look at their reports revealed that Susan's report focused on the issue of distribution channel of live chickens against the backdrop of Hong Kong government's new policy to prevent the outbreak of avian influenza. Its focus was on the poultry industry not on a Hong Kong company as stated in the task specification. As she said in her interview shown earlier in this section, she thought that the teacher "touched on the word 'industry' during lessons" and that made her believe that it was all right to focus on the industry instead of a company. She also grabbed what she thought were subtle hints dropped by the teacher towards the end of a lecture on 9 March 2005 that the topic should be about chicken and central slaughtering of poultry (from her diary entry on 9/3/2005). Based on these hints, she produced her report as it was. Although she tried hard to read the required textbook to look for the relevant theories to be included in the recommendation section as required, she was not able to do so. Her recommendations were all based on her own opinion.

The topic of Joan's report was not based on any hints from the lecturer but on her newspaper reading just four days before the submission deadline (in order to stay 'current'). The news was about a dispute between the sole supplier, wholesalers and retailers over the supply of fresh beef and she thought this exactly met the task requirements of 'current' and 'a Hong Kong company' (the sole supplier of fresh beef). This became the focus of her report and shaped the rest of the writing processes such as searching and collecting information, and outlining. Guessing the reader's expectation led her to include sections such as 'company background'. As she said "company background is necessary because the lecturer, who is a foreigner, may not know what the local company [company name] is" (Interview number 9). In order to use some theories presented in the course, she picked out three factors from the textbook, i.e. 'competitive environment', 'sociocultural environment' and 'legal environment' under the section 'environment factors'. She then tried to relate the company to these factors in her report. Although she managed to include some textbook 'theories' in the report, she was not able

to support her suggestions “by theory and practices presented in the coursework” as specified in the task because, according to Joan, “it’s not possible to do so” (Interview number 9).

It seems that Joan’s report did, to some extent, match the task specifications if the score she obtained could serve as an indicator because she scored 7.5 out of 10. However, with the total lack of any written comments on her assignment except some ticks in red on some pages, it would be impossible to tell the strengths and weaknesses of her report. Joan was satisfied with her score since she only spent four days on the report, which was far shorter than the sixteen days Susan spent on the same assignment. It would be interesting to find out what Susan’s score was; however, for some reason the report was never returned to her.

5.3.2 The case of a group project with detailed task specifications

The task representation was more complex in the two group writing projects investigated in this study. The first one was *International Marketing* in which they were required, as a group project over a period of about two months, to produce an export marketing plan. The task specifications totalling three A4 pages given by the teacher were far more detailed than the 87-word specifications for the *Distribution Management* presented in the preceding section. Briefly, the task involved identifying a Hong Kong manufacturer with export potential, conducting a “market screening exercise to identify a suitable, new foreign market”, and estimating “the size of the opportunity in that foreign market”. In addition to such detailed specifications, students were also required to submit two forms to the lecturer on specified dates. The first one was an *Export Project Proposal*, in which they identified a local manufacturer and answered some questions to assess whether it was suitable for the project; the second one was a progress report. This would presumably allow the lecturer to identify potential problems at an early stage and monitor each group’s progress over the 3-month period of the project. More important to Joan and Susan, as will be described later in this section, was a table of assessment criteria in the course document that itemised what students had to include in the report to obtain a certain grade. An excerpt of this table is shown below:

Grade	Content
A/A+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete all the criteria for a B grade <i>and</i>... • ...analyse the competitive structure of the foreign market...identification/justification of a suitable market niche/target market for your firm • provide and evaluate different estimates for the size of your target market;...financial commitment required to achieve the market objectives...; calculate a breakeven point
B/B+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete all the criteria for a C grade <i>and</i>... • ...using a variety of secondary & primary sources of information with which to define product-relevant screens, estimate potential market demand and describe the competition in the foreign market • provide proper referencing of source material
C/C+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...identify the existing markets served by this company... • display a basic understanding of the market screening process... • display a familiarity with at least two methods for estimating market demand • apply the concepts taught in the class/text
F/D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • failure to meet the criteria for a C grade

Table 5.1 Excerpt from the assessment criteria for *International Marketing* assignment

With the given step-by-step schedule of this task, both Joan and Susan had little problem getting started by simply following the schedule, i.e. found a local manufacturer that was willing to allow them access and submitted the proposal form. The task was getting a little more difficult when it came to collecting data from their chosen companies. At first, they had no ideas what questions they should ask in their company interview. Susan relied on the items listed in the assessment criteria (Table 5.1) to guess what the marketing plan should include to frame her questions (Diary entry dated 5 November 2005). By contrast, Joan searched for a sample of marketing plan to find out “what things are needed in a marketing plan” (Diary entry dated 30 September 2005). So they both knew that data collected from the interviews would be part and parcel of the marketing plan.

Based on the descriptions of the assessment criteria (see Table 5.1), they started searching for relevant information, mainly from the Web. After discussing with group mates, Susan’s group focused on searching for information related to foreign markets (the EU and USA) while Joan’s group focused on demographic data related to the company’s

product. This would provide the basic information to “define product-relevant screens, estimate potential market demand and describe the competition in the foreign market” as described in the assessment criteria.

While they were busy in searching for information, they received a 2-page handout in the lecture on 10 November 2005 entitled “*Export Marketing Plan: Final Notes*”, which provided even more detailed guidelines on how to write the marketing plan as well as a marking key that itemised in bullet point things students needed to cover. This was good news to both Joan and Susan, but Susan was not happy with its late arrival (almost six weeks after they started tackling the project and just a week before the deadline for submission) as she wrote in her diary “Damn it! Why the guidelines were not given to us earlier?” so that she could have saved some time in guessing what exactly they were expected to cover in the assignment. Joan found the ‘Marking Key’ very useful: “Compared with the assessment criteria given in the course document, this marking key is more detailed and we can follow the list of items to write up the final report... We literally went through them item by item to check whether we had left out anything” (Interview number 12).

With the additional guidelines plus marking key, they kept searching for information, writing up and producing the final marketing plan just a few hours before the deadline. From their final products, it is clear that Joan and Susan followed very closely the task specifications. Table 5.2 below compares three essential aspects of their final products (length, title and content) with those given in the specifications. The course document stated maximum 10 pages plus appendices and the final notes mentioned “feel free to put relevant, but non-essential information...in an appendix”; they wrote exactly 10 pages and put 12 to 19 pages of “non-essential information” in the appendices. With Joan’s marketing plan title “Bringing splendid living into US...” and Susan’s “LED exit sign can save your life!...”, it is clear they strived to make their titles “snappy” as mentioned in the final notes. As for the content, the underlined section/sub-section headings in Joan and Susan’s columns in Table 5.2 indicate the matches with the content in the first column (task specifications). This comparison shows that Susan’s marketing

plan seemed to adhere more closely to the task specifications. Also, Susan's assignment had a standard report cover page and a table of contents with page numbers of each chapter. She explained "we included the cover and content page to make our report look more professional, which was one of the point mentioned in the marking key – overall presentation of report" (Interview number 5). This could be some of the reasons why Susan obtained a better grade (Susan obtained a B+ while Joan a B; only around 30% of the class had a B+ and above, and 70% had either a B or C+ according to Susan). The feedback on Susan's assignment confirms that her report to a large extent met the reader's expectations as spelt out in the course document and final notes:

This was a generally excellent report! You made good use of published data and illustrated your familiarity with different methods of estimating demand. Your analysis was creative and fairly thorough. I only have some small complaints (1) you did not tell us (at the beginning) why your product is worth 30% more than substitute products – this important information was buried in the text, (2) your market demand estimates assume Y [name of company] is the only firm selling LED lights – no serious consideration was given to competitors in this part. But otherwise this was well-written. Good work!

Figure 5.5 Written comments on Susan's *Export Marketing Plan*

Task specifications in the course document (CD) and/or final notes (FN)	Joan's marketing plan	Susan's marketing plan
Length CD: max. 10 pages + appendices FN: "Your report should not exceed 10 pages...Feel free to put relevant, but non-essential information...in an appendix"	10 pages + 12 pages of appendices	10 pages + 19 pages of appendices
Title FN: "Give your project a snappy title."	"Bringing Splendid Living into US – by X [name of company]"	"LED exit sign can save your life! Export marketing plan – Y [name of company]"
Content From CD & FN (excerpt): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the company/ product (product range, income earned abroad, export motive) • Conduct the screening analysis (macro-level: economic, cultural; micro-level: customers, competitors) • Consider other relevant factors (e.g. trade barriers, entry modes) • Introduce & describe the selected market (macro-environmental factors, potential customers, potential competitors, substitute products, distribution channel options) • Provide a reasonable estimate of potential [market] demand – display a familiarity with at least 2 methods (market size, estimate demand using analogy estimation, return on investment, cash flow...) • Calculate a breakeven point • Make use of published & primary information sources 	Section headings About company <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - company background - company's mission - interview details - local market – <u>product</u>, <u>price</u>, <u>promotion</u> - <u>export motive</u> - Exported product feature Selecting & Segmenting International Markets <u>Introduction & description of selected market</u> – California, USA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Macro-economic factors</u> - <u>Potential Customers</u> - <u>Competitors and substitute products</u> - Pricing strategy - <u>Distribution channel</u> <u>Size of target market</u> <u>Break-even analysis</u>	Section headings Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Exporting Motive</u> - <u>Product Range</u> - <u>Feature of LED</u> <u>Screening Analysis</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Considered screening indicators and underlying reasons - Screening analysis procedures <u>Introduction and description of London</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Economic and Culture</u> - <u>Potential competitors and substitutes</u> <u>Potential Demand Estimation of London</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trade Audit Method - Chain ratio method - <u>Analogy Method</u> Marketing Mix of LED Emergence Exit Sign in London <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Product Strategy - Targeting, Positioning - Pricing Strategy - <u>Distribution Strategy</u> Marketing Opportunity in London <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Estimating Demand</u> - <u>Potential market size in London</u> - Estimation of Time for <u>Breakeven</u> <u>Estimation of return on investment</u>

Table 5.2 Comparison of final products with task specifications: *International Marketing* (The underlined words/phrases show the match with the task specifications; the phrases in bold are original.)

5.3.3 The case of a group project with fragmented information

The task representation of another group project for the *Marketing Strategy* course was far more complex than the preceding one. According to the course document given to students at the beginning of the course, they, in groups of three, were required to produce a report of “no more than 5 pages” based on “an application exercise”. This exercise required them to “comment critically the impact of one [of] the following strategy programs on firm performance...: brand strategy...product strategy, and distribution strategy”. The submission due date was 8 May 2006 (in the 16th week of the 14-week semester).

Task change at short notice

Both Joan and Susan started to tackle this assignment in the 3rd week when they held the first meeting with their group mates. They had no idea at all how to make a start because the original assignment was replaced by a leaflet of a famous cosmetic brand name L (pseudonym), which was an invitation to undergraduates from different countries to enter into a marketing plan competition. Briefly, contestants had to (1) imagine that they were the L Brand Manager, (2) “analyse new consumer trends and market evolutions”, (3) “develop an original marketing strategy...”, and (4) “create [their] product packaging and communication campaign”. Joan said in her interview:

“The original assignment appeared in the course outline was not the L competition... It was changed to this competition at short notice. At first we were told that the group with the best L report would take part in the competition because contestants had to be nominated. But then later we were told that...the lecturer had to nominate someone urgently based on their past academic results” [Interview number 14].

Susan had a rather negative feeling on this sudden change:

“From what I’ve known, the original idea of using the leaflet is for us to participate in the L competition; the best group in this project will be selected to take part in this competition. Later on this idea has vanished because they have selected 2 teams (6 students) to take part in the competition and we were reduced to ‘helpers in the contest’ in the sense that the useful information/data in our reports will be

fed into the 2 teams and the report itself will become an assignment. The 6 people were selected because of their past performance” (Interview number 6).

With this sudden change of task and without any further information from the lecturer, they virtually had to guess what they were supposed to do. Susan and her group mates tried to “find the direction of the project” but “at a loss” (Diary entry dated 9 Feb 2006). To get started, they searched for information about the L company. Joan had the same problem:

“I always thought of doing the assignment like what the leaflet asked for, like a competition. But Lily [pseudonym; one of her group mates] heard that we should only do the market analysis. I did try to contact the lecturer by email and telephone, but I got no reply from him. Since we’re not sure whether we should follow the competition requirements or just do the market analysis, we started to do the market analysis. We thought that no matter what happened we had to do this part anyway. In short, we didn’t have any direction.” (Interview number 14)

Guidelines from email: subject to interpretations

On 13 Feb (the 4th week), they received an email from their lecturer giving them some guidelines for this project. This set of guidelines, in response to an email from a student, was about half an A4 page. Below is an excerpt:

...You all should identify and interpret the following trends/changes in HK’s [Hong Kong] cosmetic market, in particular the “Men segment(s)”.

1. Overall changes (recent developments) in the market (past/future 3-5 years): Eg. Technology, product varieties/features/benefits; advertising appeals/themes/approaches; distribution channels (no., which one(s) have become more important in terms of contributions to sales revenue, profit, and impact on customers’ perceptions; sales potential, growth rate, profit potential.
2. Market structure analysis: No. of segments. Potential changes of each segments and ... What drive the changes?...Competition in each segments (who are the major competitors)?
3. Customer buying behaviour analysis: Major choice criteria: past, current and future. What determine/influence choice criteria?...How does advertising and sales promotions affect changes in customer preference...price, volume and occasion...?

Figure 5.6 Guidelines emailed to students

With these guidelines, they at least had some “direction” and both Joan and Susan were able to divide work among group mates (three in a group). They both perceived that the report should have a 3-part structure as shown on the guidelines. Thus, dividing up work seemed straightforward: each one was responsible for one part. However, there was some confusion when they interpreted the given guidelines. For example, Susan’s group believed that they were expected to work on “men segment” only because the guidelines mentioned “...in particular the ‘Men segment(s)’” and that they had to work on any cosmetic products. But their interpretations were badly shaken when they chanced upon information from a reliable source (a classmate who was selected to be one of the contestants). The information was “focus on body and skin care products only... should include both women and men segments” (Interview number 6). This “reliable” information was also spread to other groups including Joan’s. In one of Susan’s interviews, she gave further examples of her group’s “misinterpretation” of the guidelines:

“There were a number of twists and turns in completing this assignment, especially the content and the organisation. For example, at first I thought that [referring to point 1 of the guidelines in figure 5.6] ‘no., which one(s) have become more important...’ refers to distribution channels only because of the bracket there; however, they [other classmates] said ‘which ones’ refer to technology, product varieties/ features and all that. And what all I had done so far was distribution channels, so I called Kam [pseudonym of her classmate] again to confirm and found that I’d misunderstood the instructions. Kam was the selected one [to take part in the competition] and he knew well what we were expected to do, which is the reason why I always seek help from him... he advised us to re-organise the instructions in the email and not to take them at their face value...” (Interview number 6).

The guidelines did not stipulate how long the report should be; instead, it was mentioned in one of the lectures:

“...the lecturer didn’t include it [length of the report] in any document but he did mention it in class. It’s 10 pages and not more than 3,000 words but no limit on number of pages for appendices. So we all sensed that he wanted to see the

appendices more than the main body. That's why most classmates made more effort to make the appendices look good...For this assignment, I believe that the lecturer won't have time to read the reports in detail. He would probably have a look at the table of contents and the appendices to find out whether we have written something that meet his expectations..." (Interview number 6).

The guidelines also did not mention the format or structure, which led to guesswork from Joan and Susan. For example, Joan said:

"This time round we don't have the marking criteria, and I can only guess that with a 10-page report an executive summary would be better...I feel that 'ah sir' [in the local vernacular students often call teachers as 'ah sir'] is lazy, so the summary can allow him to have a quick glance about the whole report...I heard from Suzan that [name of the lecturer] was a lazy teacher, so I think it'd be better if I could have more graphics/ tables..." (Interview number 14).

The final products

With all the "twists and turns" as Susan put it, they submitted their assignments on the due date. Their products show clear signs of how they represented the given task the way they did. Table 5.3 below depicts three of the essential aspects which illustrate the impacts of the task-related information on their final texts.

(1) Task specifications in the leaflet (LL) and emailed guidelines (GL) (2) Information from teacher (IT) and classmates (IC)	Joan's assignment	Susan's assignment
Length IT: 10 pages; not more than 3,000 words; no limit on number of pages for appendices	10 pages + 1 page executive summary + 4 pages of appendices	10 pages + 25 pages of appendices
Title No mention of title	No title	No title
Content (excerpts) LL: (1) analyse new consumer trends and market evolutions, (2) develop marketing strategy, and (3) create product packaging and communication campaign GL: 3 parts (1) overall changes (recent developments) in the market (2) market structure analysis, and (3) customer buying behaviour analysis (see figure 5.6 for more details) IC: (1) focus on body and skin care products only, (2) include both women and men segments, and (3) do not take the guidelines at their face value.	Chapter/section headings 1. Overall change: Recent development of the skin care market 2. Market structure analysis 3. Customer buying behaviour	Chapter/section headings 1. Market structure analysis in skin care industry 2. Product market evolution 3. Competition analysis 4. Customer buying behaviour analysis 5. Skin care industry forecast

Table 5.3 Comparison of final products with task specifications/information: *Marketing Strategy*

With regard to length of the assignment, both Joan and Susan's main body of the texts have the same length as what specified from the teacher in a lecture. Their differences lie in the quantity of the appendices and the inclusion (or not) of an 'executive summary'. As their interviews show, this is a result of their different interpretations of the information from several sources. Such interpretations shaped their final texts.

Regarding the content of the assignments, they selected and organised their information collected from various sources in different ways depending on their own

interpretations. Joan stayed so close to the guidelines that she structured her text in exactly the same order and using the same wordings as those given. Susan seemed to have taken the advice given by those 'selected' classmates and did not take the guidelines at their face value as evident from the chapter headings of her group's assignment. It would be interesting to know which task representation better met teacher's expectations; however, their assignments had not been returned to them when I interviewed them for the last time on 17 May 2006, almost three months after their submissions (the due date for submission was 22 February 2006).

5.3.4 Discussion of findings

Data from this study show that task representation, being the first thing Joan and Susan did in the writing processes, is a highly complex and extended, recurring process which was never certain and, as Flower (1990b:36) puts it, "is subject to many influences and may evolve in surprising ways during writing". Depending on the degree of explicitness of task specifications, the influences revealed in this study included not only course documents, further guidelines and hints from the teacher during lectures or tutorials but also information from other classmates and the participants' own perception of the teacher. The three cases presented in this section have illustrated the complexity of task representation, the first process the participants engaged in their assignment writing. A seemingly simple word such as "current" as in "find a current news article" appeared in the task specifications of the first case perplexed both Joan and Susan. Susan did not know exactly what this might mean while Joan did the assignment as close to its deadline for submission as possible in order to base her writing on the most "current" news article. This finding to a certain extent echoes Lung's (2005) finding that lexical signals such as 'describe' and 'evaluate' could have different slants of meaning across different disciplines; students may not be able to decode the meaning as it is intended and thus fail to interpret the task specifications accurately.

Even with the 3-page detailed task specifications as in the second case, the participants still had to guess what exactly they were expected to cover in their marketing plan. Once they were given a list of items (in the form of a marking key with five

different grades from A to F) they should cover, they followed this list closely to complete their final written products. This to a large extent minimised their guess work; however, this could perhaps make them rely too much on the teacher's checklist of contents (based on which grades would be given) instead of learning the generic features of a marketing plan, an important written genre in the marketing profession as described in chapter 4 (section 4.2.3).

Their lack of genre knowledge of a marketing plan was more prominently shown in the third case in which Joan and Susan had to produce a marketing plan based on the specifications of a marketing plan competition. They did not know how to proceed and thus had to rely on guidelines given by their teacher a few weeks later. Even with the guidelines, which were rather brief, they were still not certain what they were expected to include in their assignment and thus had to clarify with other more able classmates. Sometimes, one may think that some of the uncertainties encountered by Joan and Susan during their writing processes could be easily clarified by raising their questions directly to their teachers. However, as Joan and Susan kept saying in their interviews that it was often difficult to have a face-to-face meeting with their teachers. With the constraint of time, they would rather rely on their social network to obtain the information needed from more able and thus reliable classmates to confirm their interpretations or modify their approaches.

5.4 Sources used to produce assignments

The third research question of this study is: **What are the sources they use and how do they use such sources in producing their writing tasks?** Data from this study show that searching for relevant information occupied the majority of the time Joan and Susan spent on undertaking their writing tasks: "Searching for information took up most of our time. I'd say 70% was spent on information searching and 30% on writing" (Interview number 5 from Susan) and "we spent most of our time on searching for information, whereas the time spent on writing was relatively much less" (Interview number 12 from Joan). Although their sources of information included textbooks and

power point notes from lecturers, the World Wide Web (the Web) was by far their main source of information and ideas for accomplishing their writing tasks. Textbooks and power point notes were basically used for the theories and terminology needed in the assignments; they seldom provided the specific information and ideas needed for the tasks: “Textbook is more theoretical and unless I want to use some theories otherwise textbook is not so useful” (Interview number 4 from Susan) and “I’m not saying lectures, tutorials are not useful; they are useful for those theories and strategies, e.g. the four Ps, but not the specific information that I need to do the assignment. And I did use the old ‘Introduction to Marketing’ textbook for some information on pricing strategy...” (Interview number 12 from Joan). The heavy reliance on the Web as their source of writing is evident from both the reference sections of their assignments and the source materials I collected from them. All the source materials they had used were from the Web and all the reference sections in their assignments were lists of the URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) of the web pages, without a single non-web-based source such as books and journal articles.

5.4.1 Using the Web as the main source

Once they had set their direction, they started searching for relevant information from the Web, which was the first thing they did in dividing up the tasks for group projects. Like most Web users, they used keyword search in Google or Yahoo to get the information and ideas they needed: “I did my search by typing related keywords into Google and then checked the pop up information to see whether it’s useful or not. I kept on doing this until I got something useful; then I saved the pages...” (Interview number 4 from Susan).

The data from this study show that they used the Web sources primarily for two purposes: (1) to obtain relevant **figures** usually in the form of tables and charts to support their arguments or analysis, and (2) to select relevant **texts** to provide the content of the assignments. As Joan said:

“The most difficult, time consuming and laborious part was the information search. We had to spend lots and lots of time to do keyword search that led us to

hundreds of web sites to look for the information we needed. I didn't print out the information because all I needed usually was the figures related to some areas, e.g. population density of a country. I simply copied them down for later manipulating and fitting in..." (Interview number 13).

The "manipulating and fitting in" could possibly mean plagiarism in higher education or the less pejorative term "textual borrowing" as used in applied linguistic literature (for example, Casanave, 2002; Currie, 1998; Deckert, 1993; and Pennycook, 1996).

Figures to support arguments or analysis

For example, in writing their 'export marketing plan' (major assignment for *International Marketing*), they used a great deal of data obtained from the Web. Such data included (a) market size/demand, number of manufacturers, and potential competitors in a particular industry in the selected exporting countries, and (b) demographic and macro/micro economic data of those selected countries. These figures either appeared in the body or the appendices of the assignments. In both situations the sources of the figures were clearly shown either in the footnotes or beneath the tables or charts (see figures 5.7 and 5.8 for examples of the two ways sources were indicated). They provided the exact sources of the data because they regarded the data as evidence to support their arguments or analysis. As Susan said, "we should have sources to support our points, not just based on our own opinions. For example, air pollution and stress, from our common senses, will no doubt adversely affect people's skin conditions...[but] we should look for evidence to support such common senses" (Interview number 7). They, however, perceived "textual borrowing" in a completely different way.

Excerpt from Susan's *International Marketing* assignment

[Text in the body]

In the estimation, we assume the ratio of demand to number of universities, colleges, shopping malls, hospitals, banks is roughly equivalent in both Macau and London.

(London¹⁰: No. of universities & colleges =78, shopping malls =159, hospitals=105, banks=26; Macau¹¹: No. of universities & colleges =9, shopping malls =98, hospitals=1, banks=7)

[Footnotes at the bottom of the page]

¹⁰ <http://www.yell.com/ucs/HomePageAction.do>

¹¹ <http://www.yp.com.mo/cn/>

Excerpt from Joan's *Marketing Strategy* assignment

[Text in the body]

The men segment is a treasure segment. The growth rate of this segment can be very huge. In the 2004, men's skin care has 4% increase¹³ in current value terms on the previous year, compare with the overall skin care market only have 1.8% increase¹⁴ We can say that the men's skin care market is the most profitable market in the foreseeable future. Therefore, in the following part, we would deeply investigate the competitive environment in Men's segment.

[Footnotes at the bottom of the page]

¹³ P.50 *Cosmetics and Toiletries in Hong Kong, China* September 2005 (Published) Euromonitor

¹⁴ P.75 *Cosmetics and Toiletries in Hong Kong, China* September 2005 (Published) Euromonitor

Figure 5.7 Using footnotes for referencing

Excerpt from Susan's *Marketing Strategy* assignment

Appendix 5: Sale of Facial Care by Subsector: Value 1999 and 2004

	1999	2004	Value Growth
HK\$ million			%
Facial Care	1857.20	2,100.20	13.1
Facial Moisturisers	885.00	993.30	12.2
Nourishers/anti-agers	221.00	259.40	17.4
Facial cleaners	311.00	365.20	17.4
Toners	208.00	227.20	9.2
Face Masks	189.00	208.50	10.3
Lip moisturiser	42.80	46.00	7.5
Source: Euromonitor Statistic, Cosmetics and toiletries in Hong Kong, China			

Figure 5.8 Showing source for data in situ

Text to provide the content

Often the texts were “lifted” from the source materials and “fit in” with their own writing without providing proper in-text referencing. For example, in her cosmetic product marketing plan (group project for the *Marketing Strategy*), Susan obtained a 92-page report entitled “Cosmetics and toiletries in Hong Kong” from the Web, which provided the essential information she needed for the task. An examination of the hard copy of this Web report shows that Susan did read it rather intensively because many sentences and sections were highlighted. In her marketing plan assignment, she used many figures in the form of tables/charts from the Web report and there were clear indications of their sources (as in figure 5.7). This is not the case for her uses of the source texts; the textual borrowing without following proper in-text referencing convention for citation is quite obvious. An example is shown below (the phrases and sentences in bold show the verbatim textual borrowing).

Source text	Susan’s assignment
<p><u>From p.71 of the 92-page report from the Web</u></p> <p>Enzymes are expected to continue to grow in importance, given the ongoing development of technology. In 2004, enzyme ingredients were added to product formulations, whilst natural enzymes present in the skin were also manipulated. This technology can influence skin’s supporting structure of collagen and elastin, affect the synthesis of skin lipids, regulate cell turnover and control oil production.</p>	<p><u>Excerpt from Susan’s <i>Marketing Strategy</i> assignment</u></p> <p>According to the Euromonitor Statistic, Cosmetics and toiletries in Hong Kong, China, the most recently technology development is enzymes, which can be added to product formulation. This technology can influence skin’s supporting structure of collagen and elastic, affect the synthesis of skin lipid, regulate cell turnover and control oil production.</p>
<p><u>Excerpt from a news report (appeared in the appendix of the assignment)</u></p> <p>Dr Chow said avian flu viruses are becoming more pathogenic, causing higher fatality. The virus can...</p>	<p><u>Excerpt from Susan’s <i>Distribution Management</i> assignment</u></p> <p>The main reason is that the recent avian influenza outbreaks in Southeast Asia indicate that the avian influence viruses are becoming more pathogenic and causing higher fatality, the Administrative recently reviewed the risk management of live chicken population in order to reduce the risk of an epidemic outbreak in Hong Kong through close contract between humans and large numbers of live poultry.</p>

Table 5.4 Examples of “textual borrowing” from source text (Susan’s assignment)

Another example of the way source text was used is Joan's *Distribution Management* assignment, in which about 40% of the content of the paragraph shown in table 5.5 was the exact words from the source text (in bold):

Source text	Joan's assignment
<p><u>Excerpt from a news report from the Web (appeared in the appendix of the assignment)</u></p> <p>The snap boycott was triggered by a 50 per cent drop in the cattle supply, which has sent the wholesale price soaring more than 30 per cent, according to meat traders...Traders were told that the supply had been reduced because of transport and quarantine problems on the mainland. Over the past few months, the supply of cattle has been reduced to 70 head a day from about 140...“Due to the insufficient supply, [the wholesale] price has been pushed up to \$1,600 per dan [50kg] from about \$1,200, but the retail price remains unchanged. Our livelihood is badly hit.” ...Another retailer said the reduced supply was an attempt to raise prices rather than a result of transport problems as [name of company] had claimed.</p>	<p><u>Excerpt from Joan's <i>Distribution Management</i> assignment</u></p> <p>There was no fresh beef sold in the market on Sunday since the traders refused to buy the beef from the sole meat supplier- [name of company].</p> <p>The snap boycott was triggered by the supply of cattle has been reduced to 70 head a day from about 140 and then the wholesale price has been pushed up to \$1,600 per 50 kg from about \$1,200. [Name of company] claimed that the supply was reduced due to the transport and quarantine problems on the mainland. The traders was argue that the [name of company] have declined the supply of castle in last few month, the shortage of castle was an attempt to raise prices rather than a result of transport problems as [name of company] had claimed.</p> <p>After [name of company] and the traders reached an agreement on the supply of cattle would increase to 180 head on Sunday, and return to 140 in future. The snap boycott was settled down temporarily. (Appendix 1 and 2)</p>

Table 5.5 An example of “textual borrowing” from source text (Joan's assignment)

The highlighted words in the two columns in both tables show the copied texts from sources. Some attempts of “manipulating and fitting in” can be seen in most copied texts but not all “fitting in” were syntactically correct. For example, the second sentence in Joan's assignment shown in Table 5.5 displays such a problem when she attempted to integrate two chunks of text: “The snap boycott was triggered by the supply of cattle has been reduced to 70 head a day from about 140...” Campbell (1990) made a distinction between *exact copies* and *near copies*: “*Exact Copies* were direct quotations without the punctuating quotation marks. *Near Copies* were similar to Exact Copies with the addition that syntax was rearranged, or synonyms were used for one or two content words”

(Campbell, 1990:216, original emphasis). Following Campbell (1990), “textual borrowing” in these excerpts of their assignments were likely to be cases of “near copies” because there was some degree of rearrangement of syntax and in Joan’s case there was an indication of the source text in bracket. It seemed that the teacher did not notice the copying because Joan obtained a score of 7.5 out of 10 without any written comments on the paper. Also, in Susan’s first excerpt, she did mention “according to” the source.

From the interview data and the way they borrowed texts from sources, it seems that this practice of textual borrowing in using source materials was more a lack of knowledge of academic convention rather than a deliberate attempt to plagiarise as an act of academic dishonesty. When she was shown some of the word-for-word copying in her assignments during interviews, Joan replied:

“Both the “news summary” and the “company background” sections [referring to the assignment an excerpt of which is shown in table 5.5] were easy because they were mainly copied from the Web. But I didn’t copy the entire passages; I copied a few sentences and integrated them into my own writing. I knew that I had to be very careful about the grammar because the copied phrases and sentences might not be consistent with my own writing...” (Interview number 9).

“This sentence [referring to one sentence in section 2 of the *Marketing Strategy* assignment] is a definition I copied from a textbook. I didn’t give any indication of its source because I prefer to provide in-text references only if I used the data, i.e. figures, from the sources no matter whether they’re from the Web or textbooks. And I prefer to use footnotes for this purpose. I did complete the EAP [English for Academic Purposes] course, but I think I have forgotten the referencing skills, if there were any, in the course” (Interview number 14).

5.4.2 Discussion of findings

The study shows that Joan and Susan relied heavily on Web sources to complete their assignments. Books (including textbooks) and lecture notes (usually in the form of power point notes) were rarely used as source materials. As a result of heavy use of Web sources, searching for and selecting relevant information for the specific tasks occupied most of their time in the writing processes. Once they had the necessary, relevant information, writing was a matter of transferring and, in Joan's words, "manipulating" the figures and text and "fitting in" their own writing. In the process of transferring the text from sources, they, as the data suggested, unwittingly engaged in an act of potential plagiarism or "textual borrowing" and they had never been alerted to the ethical issue and possible risk of such practice. As long as they obtained pass grades from their lecturers, they would think that such textual practice was acceptable.

The two participants in the present study were certainly not alone. L2 writing researchers and scholars have pointed out from their studies that much L2 writing by university students is done by patching together sentences and phrases from source materials (e.g. Currie, 1998; Pennycook, 1996). To most L2 student writers, textual borrowing is only a survival strategy in academic writing (Currie, 1998) with "no apparent intention to steal and cheat" (Shi, 2004:191). In his informal interviews with Chinese students at a Hong Kong university, Pennycook (1996:223) observed that plagiarism was "more a symptom of careless work than a deliberate strategy". Even if most student writers do not have the intention to cheat, they have to be alerted to the possible consequences of plagiarism. However, as this and other studies (e.g. Currie, 1998; McCormick, 1989; Pennycook, 1994) have shown, much writing with apparent plagiarism gets through teachers and the assessment system. This could possibly reinforce the practice of textual borrowing in L2 academic writing.

Apart from the issue of copying from the Web sources, another important issue relates to the reliability of such sources. An examination of the URL provided by Joan and Susan shows that the Web sources they often used were with domain names ending *.com*, *.org* and *.gov*. It seems that both Joan and Susan never questioned whether the

information provided by these organisations or individuals were reliable and trustworthy. Also, from their assignment feedback, if given, the lecturers never questioned whether or not the information or data taken from the Web sources and used extensively in the assignments were reliable.

Compared to conventional sources of information such as books, journal articles and other publications available in university libraries, the Web is *open* without any sanctioning or filtering functions performed by academic or professional editors and librarians. As pointed out by Stapleton (2005:178), “Web sources are often motivated by commercial and ideological agendas”. Broadly speaking, domain names ending with *.com* relate to commercial organisations, *.org* to interest groups of various kinds, and *.gov* to government. Through close examination of the background and authorship of the web sites, it is possible, to some extent, to establish the reliability and trustworthiness of the information provided by the sites. With increasing use of the Web as the main sources of writing assignments in higher education as shown in this study, it has become more important than before to raise students’ critical awareness of the reliability issue when using Web sources.

CHAPTER 6

Difficulties Encountered and Coping Strategies

6.1 Introduction

In chapter 5, I have described and discussed the entire writing process the participants in this study went through to accomplish their writing tasks. I have also presented and discussed how they represented the given tasks and used sources in their writing processes. This chapter focuses on the last two research questions:

Research question 4: Do they encounter any difficulties in their writing processes?

What are those difficulties?

Research question 5: What strategies do they employ in accomplishing their writing tasks?

The following two sections describe and discuss findings that address these two research questions.

6.2 Difficulties encountered

Data from this study reveal that the participants encountered several difficulties in their writing processes. These difficulties are classified into six types (as emerged from data coding and categorising), three of which were shared by both participants and three were more specific to individuals. These difficulties are described and discussed below.

6.2.1 Applying theories or concepts

Both Joan and Susan found it difficult to apply theories or concepts they were supposed to have learnt to their writing tasks, particularly the *Distribution Management* task which specified that “your recommendations should be supported by theory...” (see figure 5.4 in chapter 5 for the task specifications). The other assignments investigated in this study did not specify the requirement of applying theories and concepts except the *International Marketing* assignment, where “apply[ing] the concepts taught in the class/text” was mentioned in the assessment criteria in the course document.

In respect of the *Distribution Management* task, both Joan and Susan found it difficult to apply theories to the given task. As Susan said:

“...we also need to apply theories as stated in the written task instructions. It’s a bit difficult because I and other classmates didn’t know what theories we had learnt... I don’t understand why recommendations should be supported by theories and practices presented in the coursework [as stated in the task instruction]. I think recommendation should be creative because it’s all about solving problems. Theories should be in the analysis part, not recommendations. I don’t think other classmates knew how to include theories in recommendation. But they were in a hurry, and I think no theories were used to support recommendation” (Interview number 1).

Joan also mentioned “although the instruction brief states that the recommendations should be supported by theory etc., I don’t care because it’s not possible to do so” (Interview number 9).

Joan and Susan had their own understanding of applying theories and concepts. Susan believed that using the terminology from textbooks or lecture notes would mean that she had applied theories or concepts learnt: “He [the lecturer] should know all the theories I have used in the analysis section. If I used the terminology from the books... in my assignment, then I have used theories” (Interview number 1). The following excerpt (figure 6.1) from her assignment shows her way of applying theories and concepts:

By using **Channel Design Strategy**, the Administrative need to do **market analysis** in terms of **Market geography**, **Market Size and Density**, and **Market Behaviors**.

- **Market geography:** A location adjacent to the central slaughtering facilities for the live ducks and geese in the Western Wholesale Food Market has been identified for developing a medium-size slaughterhouse on a pilot basis. It is because the distance between slaughtering and the residential have a certain distance also there have basis faculties for the usage of slaughtering.
- **Market Size and Density:** In Hong Kong, people consumed 3.7 million of live chicken per year, and consumed 60,000 chickens per day, excluding the chilled chickens. Hence, the chicken demand is very stable and large. The consumer may probably buy in the daily or weekly basis. Also, in the particular festival, like the Chinese New Year, people had bought the 200,000- 240,000 chickens per day.
- **Market Behaviors:** Mostly, wife will be the buyer of the chicken or the house assistants in the markets or supermarket. They mostly buy in small quantities...

Figure 6.1: Excerpt from Susan’s *Distribution Management* assignment (my highlights in bold)

The highlighted phrases were taken from textbooks. Apparently, she attempted to use the marketing terms to explain her case, which she regarded as having applied theories and concepts in the task. Joan had somewhat similar understanding and practice of applying theories: “the *environmental factors* section [in her assignment] was based on theories from the textbook. I think I need to define relevant terms and then apply these terms to the case here” (Interview number 9). The following excerpt (figure 6.2) from her *Distribution Management* assignment illustrates her way of applying concepts:

Environment Factors
The environment consists of all external uncontrollable factors within which marketing channels exists. All of them are variables that can affect channels. In the case of NFH [name of the company], the price of beef is relatively low and it is the necessity, so the economic environment factor will not affect NFH distribution channel obviously... I would concentrate on discussing competitive environment, sociocultural environment and legal environment.

a. Competitive environment
Competition is always a critical factor to consider for all member of the marketing channel. NFH is facing the horizontal competition from other country frozen beef importers. There was no fresh beef sold in the market on Sunday. If the snap boycott always happens, the customer will change to eat the frozen beef since the frozen beef is the substitutes of the fresh beef. Then the demand of fresh beef will decrease sharply.

b. Sociocultural environment
From the statistic of Food and Hygiene Department, the consumption of fresh beef is decreasing from ...to ... (Appendix 4). This is because people are more concerned on their health and the trend of keep fit. Under this trend, when NFH cannot maintain a good relationship with their wholesalers, the sale of fresh beef may decrease.

c. Legal environment
Now, NFH is the sole beef supplier in Hong Kong. The exclusive right is given by HKSAR Government. Since the stable supply of beef is related to citizen’s daily life, the government may open the market or introduce more suppliers when NFH cannot maintain the stable supply. Then the big loser will be NFH.

Figure 6.2: Excerpt from Joan’s *Distribution Management* assignment (my highlights in bold)

The three terms, namely *competitive environment*, *sociocultural environment* and *legal environment*, were all taken from a textbook. Joan attempted to “define” the terms based on the textbook (the sentences in bold) before trying to apply them in the case although some applications, for example the sociocultural and legal environments, appeared to be rather superficial. Nonetheless, she achieved 7.5 out of 10 scores and there was no written feedback on her returned assignment except some ticks on each page (Susan’s similar assignment was never returned to her).

6.2.2 Understanding task specifications

The task specifications of the assignments except one were not at all explicitly spelt out, which led them to guess the exact requirements and seek information from other sources such as classmates to find out what they were expected to do. This has been described and discussed in detail in chapter 5 (section 5.3).

6.2.3 Verbalising ideas with the right words and correct grammar

The final difficulty which was shared by both Joan and Susan is concerned with their ability to use English as their L2 to write in an academic context. They both expressed quite strongly that their lack of vocabulary and weak grammar were the biggest obstacle to their writing. Susan pointed out “the major difficulty I have in writing assignment is my inability to express my ideas fully. It can be related to the mastery of grammar and vocabulary” (Interview number 8). Joan was more concerned about grammar:

“Language is the most difficult aspect because I am weak in writing [in a second language]. I have problems in expressing my ideas which are formed in Chinese... Grammar is the most difficult aspect of writing. Very often I find that the sentence structure is not quite right, e.g. missing of a main verb, the wrong tenses, and wrong prepositions. And unlike vocabulary, I can’t check it from a dictionary. I’m not too worried about lack of vocabulary because I can use ‘Yahoo’ online dictionary to find the right word...” (Interview number 16)

The following excerpt (figure 6.3), written by Joan, is from her export marketing plan for the *International Marketing* assignment, a group task in which Joan was responsible for writing the first two pages (the body of this report has ten pages, with tables and charts filling up almost half the report). The sentences and phrases in bold type are those with obvious grammatical and usage errors. Similar sentence level inaccuracies can also be found in her writing in other assignments. This confirms her perceived difficulty in using English in her academic writing. For this particular assignment (figure 6.3) in which she was given a ‘B’ grade, there were comments on the content but none on

any of the grammar errors made. This seems to indicate that the lecturer's focus was solely on the content; grammar or usage errors were ignored or tolerated.

Export motive

In the production process, the factory only produced same design of furniture in a very low amount. This is diseconomies of scale. Therefore, we would suggest "M & C" [name of company] **to export** their furniture into foreign country by using the design that have been designed before. This can fully use the design and decrease the unit production cost. Also, **it produces the furniture in a large amount can reach the economies of scale.**

After we had an interview with Ms. Lau, the General Manager of M & C, we found that **the most potential exported product is the multifunctional cabinets based on three reasons, profitable, simpleness and flexibility. The multifunctional cabinet is the most profitable category in last five years local market.** Therefore, we predict it may be the best product to export. Also, since **we are exported the furniture to the wholesalers aboard**, the installation of the furniture should be simple and easy to be learned **by the others.** The multifunctional cabinet can fit this requirement. Thirdly, **"M & C" is produce tailor-made furniture, we hope to keep its uniqueness.** The multifunctional cabinet **can easily give** more than 100 versions by just changing the color, surface materials and structure. The wholesalers can order different versions of the multifunctional cabinet by their customer need.

Figure 6.3: Excerpt from Joan's export marketing plan for the *International Marketing* assignment (highlights in bold are added)

Textual analysis of her writing in all four assignments reveals a similar pattern of sentence-level errors, which is sometimes referred to as interlanguage (Ellis, 1985), a linguistic system "different from either the speaker's first language or the target language being acquired" and that "reflects the learner's evolving system of rules" (Crystal, 1997:200). This is more serious in her assignment for the subject *Marketing Symposium* in which she had to write an individual self-reflective report of 1000 words "describing the learning experience gained from this course..." (extracted from the course document). This report differs from other writing tasks in that it is self-contained, which means the content is based on her experience and ideas rather than source texts. As a result, she could not "borrow" any text from sources and had to rely on her linguistic skills to describe her experience and express her ideas. The excerpt from this report is shown below (figure 6.4). This short excerpt from her report of 1131 words contains many examples of interlanguage, some of which are highlighted in bold.

From the last September up to now, there is about half year. Marketing Symposium is a long subject. Before I take this subject, many classmates said this is not worth to get 3 credits which need two semesters. After I take subject, I will say, “It is worth, definitely!”

The theme of Marketing Symposium 2006 is “Brand Management and strategies – Challenges and Opportunity”, our group has chosen [XYZ- company name] holding Ltd. as our research topic. [XYZ] becomes the leading brand in Herbal drink industry, so we would like to know its brand management strategies. **After finished this subject, I has built up** my skills and knowledge on the academic and non-academic aspect.

Academic aspect

Brand Management

Although this subject has had not so much tutorials, I also built up Brand Management knowledge **through self-learning and consult** [name of lecturer]. I have learnt Kevin Keller’s “customer-based brand equity” Model deeply. Also, I know more about the herbal industry in Hong Kong and Singapore and their brand management strategy through the in-depth interview and **analysis [XYZ]’s secondary information.**

Self-learning attitude

In the subject, most of the materials that we need to learn independently, [name of lecturer] told us should look through all the materials before come to his office. At the beginning, **I was quite questioning** that how I can learn the subject by myself. From primary school to university, all of the subject materials were taught by teachers. They will tell you **what is it, what you need to know, what you need to do.** This is Hong Kong teaching style—Feeding duck.

After I read through the materials, even though I also have some points are confusing. We have formed a study group, all of our groupmates discuss what we have learn from the materials and find the books which about brand strategy in the library. We got a better preparation before go to Leslie’s office. This is active learning that I have never try in other subject.

I think this active learning attitude is very useful for all subject, even the whole life.

Figure 6.4: Excerpt from Joan’s individual self-reflective report for the *Marketing Symposium* assignment (highlights in bold are added)

Susan had similar sentence level problems as the highlighted parts of the following excerpt (figure 6.5) from her individual writing task for *Distribution Management* illustrate. Such grammar errors recurred in different ways and to different extents in her other assignments. Similar to what I have discovered from Joan’s writing, Susan’s writing displayed a similar pattern: there were more grammar and usage errors in her individual writing tasks than in her group writing tasks. The excerpt from one of her group writing tasks is shown in figure 6.6 below (examples of grammar errors are highlighted in bold).

Part 3: Recommendations

2 ways Communication

Is the money really can solve the conflict probably? If yes, how much is the most suitable and reasonable for solving the conflict among the **Administrative** and other parties? **Since, I think the elimination of poultry industry is inevitably**, so if both parties can conduct 2 way communications **probably**, they will **feel more satisfaction with** this policy.

Secure investigations for the imported chicken from China

Recently much negative news about the China's food quality, so I think if the administrative really want to implement this policy, they must make sure the quality of chicken that imported to Hong Kong. Otherwise, if any problem chickens imported to Hong Kong, then the **Administrative** will be blamed by the public again.

Slaughter process of chicken must be under hygiene condition

The slaughter house must keep in a very hygiene condition, since the Administrative change the distribution channel due to the hygiene problem, so if any incident happened. Then, the policy will be meaningless, so the **in charge company** must ensure that everything is alright and set the guidelines for the employees in the slaughter house.

Figure 6.5: Excerpt from Susan's individual writing task for *Distribution Management* (highlights in bold are added)

a. Voltage and Socket standards

We choose Supply Voltage and Plugs Design as the first step for screening, as the LED emergency exit sign must match with country's supply voltage and fit with the country's socket design. Otherwise, the LED exit signs cannot function. Therefore, **the countries which supply voltage is not fall between 220V to 240V and with different socket design will be screen out.** For our product, the supply voltage **should be fall between 220V to 240V and the plugs design please refers to...** Otherwise, it doesn't work. For our product, the supply voltage **should be fall between 220V to 240V and the socket design please refers to** Diagram 1.

b. GDP per capita

The price of products is relatively 20-30% higher than competitors, so that we need to find out which advanced economies countries **can really afford that such high price.** Therefore, we would like to use GDP per capita as our indicator for screening out the developing countries as the GDP per capita can reflect the living standard of a country. Higher living standard means that the country is rich and they can afford the high price products.

c. Language

For the emergency exit sign, it has English version, Chinese version and Logo version (refer to appendix 3). We choose language as screening because we prefer to choose the country who can understand English as our target market, so that the both English and Logo version can be exported. Therefore, the countries which do not have English as their official language (potentially they may not understand English) **will be screen out.** The screening of language is to ensure that the exporting market can understand the English Exit sign.

Figure 6.6: Excerpt from Susan's group writing task for *International Marketing* (highlights in bold are added)

6.2.4 Finding the right information

Susan considered finding the right information difficult: “I enjoy reading intensively if I’m given the materials but I find it difficult to find the right information from sources. And I have no problem in selecting and organising information” (Interview number 8). Since the Web was the main source of information for almost all her writing tasks, she felt to some extent handicapped by her inadequate Web searching skills. In one occasion when she and some of her group mates consulted her subject lecturer on matters related to an assignment, she was amazed that the lecturer could find the right information with ease: “...he quickly showed us how to use the right key words to look for the right information, and we found that it was far more effective than our old ways of searching, the same Google search. We haven’t received any training on Web search; it would be nice if we could have some training on that...” (Interview number 7).

6.2.5 Presenting information from source texts

Although searching the Web or other sources for information was time consuming for Joan, it was the selecting and transferring the information to the assignments that she had particular difficulty with:

“This morning when I was reading the 90-odd page report downloaded from the Web, I felt that the information should be enough. The only problem is I don’t know how to present it. This report doesn’t use the term ‘market structure analysis’ and it contains analysis of the whole industry part by part with a great deal of data. But I don’t know how to extract and present those data in my assignment... The most difficult part of writing chapter 2 of this assignment is selecting and presenting the vast amount of information gathered from different sources...” (Interview number 14)

She was referring to the *Marketing Strategy* assignment (see chapter 5, section 5.3.3 for details) in which she was responsible for writing the “Market structure analysis” section. On the one hand, she was very satisfied with finding the 90-odd page report from the Web because it contained almost all the data she needed to complete the writing task. On the other hand, she found it difficult to select and present the information in her

writing. She organised her section into 4 sub-sections sticking quite closely to the guidelines given by the lecturer: (1) Market segmentation, (2) Potential changes of the segments, (3) Implication for the changes, and (4) Competitive environment. As discussed in chapter 5 (section 5.4.1), she heavily relied on this report from the Web to provide her with the statistics and figures. There are 12 instances of such uses from the same source in the 1,300-word section. All instances were related to figures. The following excerpt is an example:

2.1 Market segmentation
...
In Hong Kong skin care market, the female products are in the mature stage but the male product only in the growth stage. **In 2004, there is nearly 4% increase of men's skin care sales value compare with last year**⁸, which is the highest growth rate within men's grooming products. There is a great potential in the male skin care product market.
...
2.4 Competitive environment
...
The men segment is a treasure segment. The growth rate of this segment can be very huge. **In the 2004, men's skin care has 4% increase**¹³ **in current value terms on the previous year, compare with the overall skin care market only have 1.8% increase**¹⁴
We can say that the men's skin care market is the most profitable market in the foreseeable future. Therefore, in the following part, we would deeply investigate the competitive environment in Men's segment.

Figure 6.7 Presenting information from source texts: excerpt from Joan's *Marketing Strategy* assignment (highlights in bold are added)

The highlighted sentences show how she presented the figures taken from the source material. It seems that her purpose of using these figures was to justify the argument that men's skin care market was the potentially profitable market. However, with figures from only a particular year, she could hardly show the trend of increase and thus it would be difficult to support her argument. There are many instances of such weak argumentation in sections of report written by Joan, which indicates that she was indeed, as she said, not able to make use of the data from source materials to build up a convincing argument in her writing.

6.2.6 Working with group mates

Susan found it difficult and at some points even frustrating in dealing with group mates. This has been described and discussed in some detail in chapter 4, specifically in section 4.4.2. With six students working together to produce a 10-page report, Susan found it troublesome to (1) divide up work, (2) seek agreement among group mates on how to accomplish the task, and (3) maintain coherence and quality of writing in the final product. If she had a choice, she would prefer individual writing tasks because:

“individual writing is more efficient than group writing. Apart from the discussions and negotiations which are often time consuming, time is often wasted in waiting for group mates’ completion of their parts. Very often they ask for more time to get their parts done even though we have agreed on a deadline to complete their parts. From the perspective of learning, yes, I agree that group discussion and brainstorming can generate more ideas. But I have no problem in generating good ideas; I can mull over the task during showers and bus rides and come up with good ideas without discussing with others” (Interview number 8).

6.2.7 Discussion of findings

Data from this study show that Joan and Susan encountered six different kinds of difficulties, three of which were common to both while three were more individual. The discussion in this section will focus on the five difficulties they encountered since the one related to task specifications has been covered at some length in chapter 5.

Applying theories or concepts

One of the ‘C’ grade assessment criteria at the faculty level is “Display a basic understanding of the concepts” as presented in chapter 4 (section 4.3.2). It appears that the business faculty and thus the lecturers would expect students to apply the concepts and theories they have learnt from lectures and readings to the situations given in their tasks in order to display or demonstrate their understanding. The fact that this particular requirement is one of the criteria for a ‘C’ grade seems to indicate that this is a *basic* requirement for all subjects in the business faculty. As mentioned in chapter 4 (section 4.3.2), both Joan and Susan did not pay any attention to the faculty level assessment

criteria. This could explain why they only mentioned the difficulty of applying theories and concepts when such requirement was stipulated in the writing tasks. In this study, only the tasks from *Distribution Management* and *International Management* specified this requirement in the respective task specifications.

The disciplinary requirement or expectation of applying concepts and theories is also reported in Currie's (1993) study of writing tasks assigned to students in a Bachelor of Commerce undergraduate degree programme. She found that the assignments of the Management and Organisational Behaviour course "required the students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of concepts...as well as their ability to apply these concepts to a variety of situations" (1993:106). Her student participants were able to achieve good grades such as 'B+', yet none of them "had learned to apply the concepts" (p.113). She argues that "Without explicit knowledge of what they were doing, the students were unlikely to learn from either their mistakes or their successes." (p.113). In her more recent article, Currie (1998) reported that the professor of an undergraduate commerce programme admitted his doubt in his ability to explicitly teach this skill: "I don't know that I can teach them to do it. I just know that I *can* do it" (1998:6, italics in original). In the case of Joan and Susan, with minimal or even no feedback on most of their assignments and without being explicitly taught such knowledge and skills as Currie's (1998) study has shown, all they knew was the grades or scores of their assignments. Without knowing whether their knowledge and practice of applying concepts or theories were acceptable in their disciplinary community, they, as Currie (1993) has argued, were unlikely to acquire such skills to meet the disciplinary expectations.

One of the disciplinary expectations, as discussed in chapter 4, is that students, upon graduation, should have understood the fundamental marketing concepts in order to become beginner professionals in the field. To become marketing professionals, according to the then Dean of the Stanford Business School, Robert Joss, they need both *knowledge*, that is conceptual understanding of marketing, and *experience* gained from on-the-job practice (Joss, 2001, cited in Dowling, 2004:17). To acquire this conceptual

understanding seems to be the most important learning outcome of the marketing programme and students' achievement of this outcome is to a large extent evaluated through their project work.

English proficiency in academic writing

The other difficulty both Joan and Susan encountered in their writing processes relates to their proficiency in English, which they felt was insufficient to enable them to write clearly and accurately in their content course assignments. The data, however, reveal two points that are worth mentioning. First, although there are many instances of interlanguage in the assignments investigated in this study, the frequency is relatively less in group writing tasks. One possible explanation is that the presence of group mates may help detect and correct those linguistic errors in the writing processes, especially if one of them has better grasp of standard lexicogrammar as Susan said:

“A team mate with good English is much better than having an English teacher proofreading our writing because the teacher, who has no idea of what we're trying to say, can only help us with grammar accuracy. However, a team mate with good English knows what we are doing and want to say and can thus help us far better than an English teacher can”. (Interview number 8)

Joan made similar remarks:

“I can learn from team members; they can point out errors I made but I can't see myself. Since they have a stake in the assignments, they are concerned about any errors made [that would lower the grades]”. (Interview number 16)

Second, both Joan and Susan were frustrated that subject teachers would only give feedback on the content of the assignments but never on language as Joan said “[Help from lecturers is] important. But their help is only confined to content and direction; nothing on grammar and writing skills...” (Interview number 16). They felt that they could hardly improve their English proficiency in writing because they would probably keep on making the same grammar and usage errors until someone drew their attention to such problems.

Despite the fact that Joan and Susan had been learning English for about 17 years and passed different public English language examinations albeit with low grades (see chapter 3, section 3.5.2), their disciplinary writing still showed many instances of sentence-level errors. They often found their relatively poor command of standard English to a large extent inhibited their presentation of information and expression of ideas in situated writing such as the writing tasks in their discipline. In their first year at university, they completed a one-semester *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) course; both obtained a grade B. An examination of the course book used in this course showed that this was a course for *general academic purposes* (Hyland, 2006) which covered skill areas such as summarising, paraphrasing and quoting from sources; general academic writing style; and organising academic texts. The texts which were presented in the course book and which students were required to produce were general argumentative essays. The findings in this study indicate that such general purpose English courses had little impact on enhancing Joan and Susan's writing skills in their disciplinary courses. This supports findings from previous research that EAP courses to a large extent do not help L2 students cope with their disciplinary writing demands (e.g., Bacha, 2003; Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Duff, 2001; Spack, 1997; Zhu, 2004b). The findings in the present study point quite clearly to the need for more situated assistance in students' writing instead of more general grammar and vocabulary courses.

Finding and presenting information

Since the content of all the writing tasks (except the reflective essay) came from information collected mainly from the Web, the participants in this study experienced difficulties in two related aspects of information: finding and presenting. Susan found it particularly difficult in finding the right information because she received no training in this aspect. With the huge amount of information available on the Web, different web hosts have developed search engines to help users narrow down their searches and obtain the information they want. Susan's difficulty in this aspect reminds teachers that students' abilities to use these search engines effectively and efficiently cannot be taken for granted. With the increasing demand for obtaining information from the Web in undertaking

academic writing tasks, it seems that teachers should rethink whether students would need assistance in developing their skills in searching for information for academic purposes.

Once the information had been located and collected, Joan found it difficult to present it in her writing. As the data in this study shown (see chapter 5, section 5.4.1), both Joan and Susan mainly used figures and statistics from the source materials to support and build up their arguments. Examination of Joan's way of presenting information (section 6.2.5) shows that she was not able to make use of the figures (assuming they were reliable) to achieve her purpose of building up convincing arguments. This seems to be closely associated with a lack of writing skills, particularly skills relating to writing from sources. The findings seem to suggest that the writing skills Joan and Susan were taught from their year-one EAP course did not transfer well into their disciplinary writing.

6.3 Coping strategies

Coding and categorising of the data (see section 3.8) in this study show that they mainly employed eight strategies in accomplishing their writing tasks. They are:

Strategy 1: Dividing up work and collaborating with group mates

Strategy 2: Choosing the right group mates

Strategy 3: Seeking information from more able classmates

Strategy 4: Exchanging information with other classmates

Strategy 5: Guessing the reader's expectations

Strategy 6: Relying on assessment criteria

Strategy 7: Skipping classes

Strategy 8: Using an online dictionary

This section describes each strategy in sequence.

6.3.1 Dividing up work and collaborating with group mates

To ensure that the group writing tasks were completed within the deadline while allowing them time to cope with other commitments (e.g. assignments from other subjects and extra-curricular activities), Joan and Susan employed this strategy for every group project. This strategy includes:

- breaking down the group task into smaller tasks such as searching for a particular area of information or taking up writing a particular part of the report; and
- keeping close contact with group mates through mobile phone or Internet enabled discussion forums such as MSN to keep track of their progress.

This strategy could speed up their task completion as Joan said “we were able to do it fast because we divided up work among ourselves: three of us were responsible for doing the ‘Issue Discussion’ and the other three the ‘Major Project’” (Interview number 10). As the deadline was approaching, they very often had to work through the night and much closer collaboration became necessary to find out whether they were on the right track towards completion. Under those circumstances, they used mobile phones and Internet discussion forum to communicate: “The day before the deadline, three of us had to work till 5 am the other day through real time discussion forum – the MSN. The discussion was about what we should include but hadn’t included...” (Interview number 12 from Joan).

As mentioned in chapter 4, Susan had some difficulties in employing this strategy which led to her negative attitude towards group work. Nonetheless, the reality was that both of them had to rely on this strategy to accomplish the tasks.

6.3.2 Choosing the right group mates

Given the fact that almost 90% of their writing tasks were done in groups of three to six and that collaborating with group mates was important, having the right group mates became a key strategy. Both Joan and Susan felt strongly on the importance of forming groups with someone they would like to work with. As discussed in chapter 4 (section 4.3.3), students were usually granted autonomy to form their own groups except in some situations where this was not possible. Joan seemed to be more successful in employing this strategy:

“The most crucial element for group project is the group members you work with. Most lecturers allow us to choose our group mates. Before the semester starts we [Joan and her good friends] would check the tutorial group time table and try to enrol in the same tutorial groups so that we can work together in a group. It’s far more efficient than forming a group with someone I’ve never worked with. Yes, I can perhaps have some new thoughts from new members but efficiency is far more important. I’ve had the experience of quarrelling with group mates in the process, and this wasted a lot of time and energy” (Interview number 13).

Compared with Joan, Susan seemed to be less successful in employing this strategy resulting in her dismay and frustration at working with her group mates (see chapter 4 section 4.4.2).

6.3.3 Seeking information from more able classmates

Data in this study show that this strategy was employed for the purpose of clarifying whether their task representation was “correct”, in the sense that how accurate their interpretation of the task was. As discussed in chapter 5, the task specifications or requirements as given in the course documents were very often unclear, incomplete and fragmented. To cope with this recurring situation, they sought help from other more able classmates, i.e. those classmates who were high achievers in class, to make sure that they did not misinterpret the task requirements and that they were on the right track. They did make use of the teacher consultation hours as Joan said:

“About finding out the expectations of teachers, we usually start with the course documents. If they are not clear, we’ll consult teachers. If we can’t find them,

we'll speak to other more able classmates to get the necessary information.”

(Interview number 15)

However, consultation with teachers was not always easy:

“We didn't use any consultations even though we had problems in doing this assignment because he's [the lecturer] hard to find. He always said he was busy and often went on trips.” (Interview number 6 from Susan)

“When we were not sure about some of the points I mentioned above, we didn't ask [name of lecturer] because we had lesson only on Wednesday and the major part of our work was done between 16 (Thursday) and 21 (Tuesday) Feb.”

(Interview number 14 from Joan)

Even if they could speak to the lecturer, it was not always helpful:

“We [five of us] went to see [name of lecturer] on 9 Nov. to find out more about market screening; the meeting lasted around 30 minutes, which was the only consultation we had for this subject. But it's not at all helpful in our understanding.” (Interview number 12 from Joan)

Thus, speaking to their peers became the most convenient way to seek information and perhaps the last resort to Joan and Susan.

6.3.4 Exchanging information with other classmates

As discussed in chapter 5, searching and collecting information is one of the writing processes that consumed a great deal of their time. Both Joan and Susan had developed their network of classmates with whom they would exchange useful information for the writing tasks. As Joan mentioned in her interviews:

“I also spoke to M (name of classmate). She's not in my group but we often exchange information when we're doing assignments; she had got another piece of material from the Web. It's about skin care in Hong Kong, not as recent as the one I got but more concise.” (Interview number 14)

6.3.5 Guessing the reader's expectations

Both Joan and Susan knew the importance of meeting the reader's expectations in order to obtain a good grade for their assignments. With the incomplete and fragmented information they were given, they had developed over time the following ways to guess the expectations of their lecturers.

- Almost all subjects had oral presentations as one of the assessments. Very often the lecturers gave instant feedback soon after the presentations were done in group. From such feedback, Joan and Susan would have some understanding of the likes and dislikes of a particular lecturer.
- Different lecturers had their distinctive teaching approach and style. By carefully observing such features over time, Joan and Susan formed a mental profile of a lecturer, based on which they constructed their writing to meet reader's expectations in the most efficient manner.
- They also formed an impression of lecturers' expectations from their past assignments.
- Often information about the likes and dislikes of lecturers were passed around classmates. By gathering this information through the grapevine, Joan and Susan formed a partial picture of a particular lecturer.

By integrating these sources of information, Joan and Susan had a more informed-guess of the reader's expectations. They often categorised lecturers as 'harsh' or 'lazy'. For examples:

“[name of lecturer] is rather harsh compared with other lecturers, which we came to know from our first individual assignment in this subject... Some classmates only got 7 out of 20 scores; the best score was only 15. So we have to be a bit more careful and have to put more effort into it to get a better score...” (Interview number 3 from Susan)

“I heard from [name of classmate] that [name of lecturer] is a lazy teacher, so I think it'd be better if I could have more graphics/ tables [in the assignment]...I think a lazy person likes graphics rather than texts...” (Interview number 14 from Joan)

6.3.6 Relying on assessment criteria

As mentioned in chapters 4 and 5, both Joan and Susan relied heavily on the assessment criteria, if given, to *select* and *organise* the content of their assignments. To them, the assessment criteria were more explicit and practical than the rather unclear and incomplete task specifications. Even more useful was the marking scheme or key given in one of the writing tasks, an export marketing plan for the *International Marketing* (see section 5.3.2). This marking scheme is a table with two main columns: (1) the left column provides a list of items of ‘what’ to include and ‘how’ to present it, and (2) the right column is divided into 5 sub-columns labelled A, B, C, D and F, which correspond to the grades for each listed items. The scheme mainly served as a feedback instrument to be returned to students after marking but it was given along with the course document. Joan and Susan found it very explicit and useful: “Compared with the assessment criteria given in the course document [on page 4], the marking scheme is more detailed. We can follow the list of items to write up our final paper...” (Interview number 12 from Joan).

6.3.7 Skipping classes

Skipping lectures or tutorials to meet assignment deadlines was one of the strategies the participants employed occasionally. With an average of 5 to 6 subjects to cope with in one semester (apart from the demands of their personal lives and other extra-curricular activities), they found it almost impossible to have a well-planned project schedule as advised by student counsellors. Joan put it plainly: “We basically are driven by the deadlines: do whatever is close to the deadlines...” (Interview number 13). A typical situation is what Joan described below:

“On the day of the deadline [18 Nov], we did the Issue Discussion presentation in the morning. And at 11:30 am we started to dash through the remaining 4 ½ hours to finish the assignment... We had no choice but to skip the 3-hour tutorial...”
(Interview number 12)

Although there were official attendance requirements (usually 70% to 80%) for all courses, many lecturers did not bother to take students’ attendance. According to Joan

and Susan, skipping classes was rather common among their classmates for various reasons.

6.3.8 Using an online dictionary

Both Joan and Susan were using the Yahoo online bilingual dictionary available on the Yahoo homepage (<http://hk.dictionary.yahoo.com>) to decode and encode text when reading and writing. While Susan mainly used this free dictionary for decoding difficult words when reading, Joan relied more heavily on it to cope with the lack of vocabulary when writing. As Joan said: “I’m not too worried about lack of vocabulary because I can use Yahoo online dictionary to find the right word: I type in the Chinese characters and it provides me with a list of English words...” (Interview number 16). This was indeed a very convenient tool to help them verbalise their ideas in English without leaving the keyboards. However, there is a problem with using this tool to find the right word: there are often too many words of different parts of speech from which to choose. For instance, the user is provided with the following lists of words when searching for the Chinese phrase “*ken ding*” which literally means “sure” or “certain”:

1. to affirm; to approve; to confirm
2. affirmative; positive; definite; sure
3. affirmatively; certainly; surely; definitely; undoubtedly; absolutely

(Source: <http://hk.dictionary.yahoo.com/>)

These words have somewhat different shades of meanings and usage. To be able to select the right word and use it correctly in context, users should either have some knowledge of these words or use another good learner dictionary to find out their exact meanings and examples of correct usage. The following excerpts (figures 6.8 and 6.9) from Joan and Susan’s writing can illustrate this problem:

Company background

“M & C” [name of company] interior and furniture design was established in 1997. It opened the first retail branch selling furniture in Hong Kong, and meanwhile set up a 50,000 sq. ft factory in Shenzhen. Up to now, the company has 6 branches in Hong Kong, scattering from Chatham Road to Ma Tau Wai Road.

Figure 6.8 Problem of using online dictionary (excerpt from Joan’s *International Marketing* assignment)

Joan found the word “scatter” from the online dictionary and used it here (last line in Figure 6.8) not knowing its correct usage and common collocation.

When the project is done, I am pleased but it is not good enough to be thrilled say it is a really good project, but we did put a lot of effort on it and also I could learn and understand...

Figure 6.9 Problem of using online dictionary (excerpt from Susan’s *Marketing Symposium* assignment)

While writing this sentence (figure 6.9), Susan would like to use a stronger word for “pleased”. She found the word “thrilled” from the online dictionary and used it in this sentence (line 1). Even though she was not certain of its usage, she did not (or did not have time to) check a conventional dictionary before using it and, as a result, the word was not correctly used in her writing.

6.3.9 Discussion of findings

The findings show that their strategies were employed to cope with four main demands from their writing tasks: (1) group work (strategies 1 and 2), (2) information (content and structure) relating to the writing tasks (strategies 3 to 6), (3) workload (strategy 7), and (4) vocabulary (strategy 8).

Group work: ideals and reality

As discussed in chapter 4, group work, which formed the majority of the participants' writing tasks, can be a challenge to students. Students like Joan enjoyed group work mainly because she successfully employed strategy 2 in forming her own group well before the start of the semester to make sure that she could work with classmates she knew well. On the other hand, students like Susan were less able to cope with the demand of the group dynamic resulting in frustration as discussed in chapter 4. This supports findings by Leki (2001) and Ho, Chan, Sun and Yan (2004).

This reveals the conflict between ideals and reality. From the teachers' perspective, one of the rationales for adopting group writing projects was to cultivate students' abilities to work as a team so that they would be better able to work with people in their future workplaces (see chapter 4, section 4.3.3). However, in reality, the objective of undertaking group writing tasks for students such as Joan and Susan was simply to get the best grades possible in the most efficient manner (due to their heavy workload); thus they would use any effective strategy to make sure that they achieved their objective.

Information needed: content and structure

Data from this study show that information is the lifeblood of the participants' writing tasks. Information in this context consisted of two main types: *content* and *structure*. Content is concerned with *what* to include and structure is about *how* to present it. The fact that 50% of their strategies (strategies 3 to 6) are about seeking the information needed to meet readers' expectations indicates the importance of information in disciplinary writing. As shown in the preceding chapter, task specifications for the assignments investigated in this study were never complete and clear enough for Joan and

Susan. Even with relatively detailed task specifications such as their *International Marketing* assignment, they still had to confirm with others whether their interpretations were correct. Both of them were close to panic in seeking information when they had to cope with unclear and incomplete task specifications typified by the *Marketing Strategy* assignment.

As the findings show, the more direct way of approaching the teacher after class for clarifying the requirements of the assignment turned out to be not their commonly used strategy. They mentioned three reasons why this was so: (1) the teacher was often busy and difficult to find, (2) their schedule did not match with that of the teachers, and (3) the consultation was not helpful. In the end they found it more convenient and useful talking to their peers (the more able classmates, the achievers in their class). One possible explanation to this phenomenon is the social distance. Students such as Joan and Susan found it easier to speak to someone who was much closer to them in terms of social distance. In other words they shared more or less the same experience, knowledge and language with their classmates. By contrast, the social distance between teacher and student is usually not as close, which could possibly lead to some barriers to communication. The communication could be even more difficult if the consultation was conducted in the students' L2 as some of the lecturers were native speakers of English and did not speak Cantonese, the participants' L1.

Online translation dictionary: a quick fix to lack of vocabulary

To Joan and Susan, the handy tool of an online translation dictionary provided a quick solution to their lack of vocabulary. This strategy tied in well with one of their difficulties described in section 6.2.3: vocabulary and grammar. It seems that they, especially Susan, were aware of the problem that they might have used the words provided by the dictionary in a non-standard way; however, with limited time and with no immediate assistance available, they had little choice but to guess the correct usage. Feedback, if given, from the lecturers seemed to reinforce their use of this strategy. Their readers had never commented on their language; thus, Joan and Susan kept using this

strategy to complete their writing tasks and achieve their purpose of passing the subjects with “acceptable grades”, i.e. a ‘B’ or ‘B+’, in the most efficient way possible.

Heavy code mixing found in their outlines and notes on paper suggest that, at the early stages of idea forming and outlining, they expressed them in both their L1 and L2. They would then have to translate whatever ideas encoded in their L1 into English. In the process of the translation, they relied, to different degree, on the online dictionary to provide them with the needed words but not necessarily the correct usage.

Previous research on L2 writing also found different extents of using L1 in the writing process. Li’s (2007) study of the writing of a 3rd-year doctoral student of chemistry in China revealed that her participant wrote the outline in Chinese because it would help him express himself more clearly and prevent him from running “off track” (p.66). Gosden (1996) found that most of his Japanese participants, doctoral students in science, relied heavily on their L1 to write their research paper and then went through a translation process to turn Japanese into English. By contrast, in his study of 22 NNEST postgraduate students in England, Shaw (1991) found that only two of them used their L1 at the initial stages of the writing process while the rest thought about their dissertation mostly in English. But all of his respondents found “vocabulary... and finding the right word for the context” (p.195) their biggest problem. To cope with this problem, nearly every one used dictionaries, particularly bilingual ones. If online translation dictionaries had been available at the time of Shaw’s study (which was conducted 17 years ago), his respondents might have used this tool to cope with the same problem the participants in the present study faced.

Skipping classes and workload

Although skipping classes to complete the assignments on time is certainly not endorsed by teachers, data from this study reveal that this was one of the strategies employed by the two participants in this study to cope with the heavy workload. Examining Joan and Susan's diaries allows me to understand why they skipped classes. They almost always worked past midnight and sometimes all night several days before the deadline of the assignment. For example, the deadline for submitting the export marketing plan for the *International Marketing* was on 18 November and Susan's work pattern was shown in her diary entries extracted below:

12 Nov (Sat) – mid night [i.e. 3 to 4 am] – search for info – very tired
 13 Nov (Sun) – mid night – search for info – very sleepy
 14 Nov (Mon) – TDC [Trade Development Council] – search for country info...
 15 Nov (Tue) – CC [computer centre on campus] – carry on doing the screening
 [till 12 pm], very tired... sleepy
 16 Nov (Wed) – CC – thinking about how to analyse...
 -- mid night – carry on doing and completed my part...
 17 Nov (Thu) – 1 am – continuously doing – editing [parts received from group
 mates]...
 -- midnight – formatting...
 18 Nov – early in the morning – formatting – handing in the assignment
 (Diary 05/06 S1)

From these diary entries, it is clear that she was fully engaged, with almost all her time and energy, in the writing task when the deadline was approaching. Even if she attended classes during this intense period, she would have to struggle to keep herself awake let alone actively engage in learning. With five subjects and the associated assignments to deal with in one semester, it is understandable that skipping classes was one of their coping strategies.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter summarises and discusses the main findings of this study. I start with the general findings that address the *primary research question* of this study. It is then followed by more specific findings that answer the five *specific research questions*. I then suggest some implications for teaching in higher education based on the findings of this study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study and then put forward some suggestions for future research.

7.2 Summary and discussion of main findings

This study set out to investigate how non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their assessed writing tasks in the contexts in which the writing takes place. Five specific research questions were developed to guide data collection and analysis. These questions focused on (1) the *contexts* in which the participants undertook their writing tasks, (2) their *task representation*, (3) the *sources* they used and ways in which they used them, (4) *difficulties* they encountered, and (5) their *coping strategies*.

In order to provide a detailed, rich and more holistic account of students' writing processes in a natural setting, a longitudinal case study approach was adopted in this study. The data for this study were collected from multiple sources over the course of two academic years (four semesters). The data sources include: (1) questionnaires (to elicit background information of participants), (2) text-based interviews, (3) participant diaries, and (4) various documents relating to the assignments investigated in this study such as course documents; outlines and drafts produced by the participants; the source materials they used; their final, submitted assignments; and feedback, if any, from teachers.

7.2.1 General findings

The main findings of this study have shown that the operations the student participants undertook in their writing process to produce academic writing tasks in their disciplinary courses were complex and influenced by the contexts in which the writing took place. A seemingly ordinary, tidy task turned out to be complicated when students attempted to interpret the task specifications according to their own knowledge and background. Their task representation then triggered a series of operations that turned their multiple representations into the final written products. These operations or processes are not independent; instead, they are all closely intertwined and are also influenced, to different extent, by the disciplinary, institutional and students' local/immediate contexts. Nine essential processes were identified and categorised into the three traditional stages:

1. PREWRITING includes *task representation*, *setting direction*, *task allocation* (for group work), *searching for and collecting information*, and *planning/outlining*.
2. WRITING involves *drafting* and *collecting and integrating parts* (for group work).
3. REVISING involves *proofreading* and *final checking*.

It was found that the participants, in response to a given task, would firstly go through the process of *task representation*, in which they interpreted the given task instructions or specifications to find out as precisely as possible what they were required to do and how they should present it. This process was found to be complex and often problematic but important in that it determined their direction. A perceived misinterpretation would mean they had to go back to this first process again and adjust or readjust their direction (see section 7.2.2 in this chapter).

The next process was *setting direction* in which they decided which way to go. This was especially important for group work, in which each member had to agree on the direction before *allocating task* among members. It was then followed by *searching for and collecting information*, in which they engaged in a process of seeking and gathering information needed for the task as they interpreted it. When they had gathered what they believed to be sufficient information, they progressed to *plan* their writing by outlining or

sketching the content and organisation of the paper. Based on this outline, they started actual writing (or *drafting*) mainly using computer. They often revised their writing while they were in the process of drafting. Once they had completed their part (for group work), one group member collected different parts from other members and put the parts together to form the entire paper. Some *proofreading* and *final checking* was done only if they were not in a rush to hand in their papers.

The three stages were found to be not exactly linear but recursive, which is consistent with the findings from previous writing process studies (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983). The nine main processes identified in this study, however, were found to be generally linear in that the participants had to complete a particular process before progressing to the next one. Some processes were recursive, which means the participants often had to move back and forth until they finished their final written products. This recursive act was mostly triggered by *task representation*. If the participants found that they might have misinterpreted the task instructions, they would go backward to adjust their representation, which meant they would have to reset their direction, re-allocate the tasks and so on. This shows the overarching function of *task representation* in the entire processes. This process, however, was never straightforward and involved a great deal of guess work.

Of all the three stages, *prewriting*, which involved five processes, took up the majority of their time (around 80%). The *writing* stage took up much less time compared with *prewriting*. The *revising* stage often took place simultaneously with the *writing* stage while the overall revising (when all parts of the assignment had been collected and put together) was often skipped because of the approaching deadline for submission. This is in stark contrast with findings from a recent study of time allocation to writing processes of L2 writers, which showed formulation (converting ideas into language) was the dominant process (Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy & Marín, 2007). Roca de Larios et al.'s (2007) study, however, was carried out in laboratory setting where the participants were given an argumentative task to write without the need to collect any information from sources. With writing tasks situated in the participants' disciplinary courses that

involved multiple task representations, group interaction, and collecting information from sources, the *prewriting stage* in this study was far more complex than artificial tasks done for experimental purpose and thus it was the dominant stage. Having presented the general findings of this study, I will then move on to the more specific findings that address the specific research questions.

7.2.2 Specific findings

Research question 1: What are the disciplinary, institutional and local contexts in which non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their writing tasks?

The *disciplinary context* can be construed as the nature of the marketing discipline and the core values and practices of marketing. The analysis in this study shows that marketing, being one of the most important functions of a business, emphasises the application of concepts and theories to meet the marketing-related challenges faced by organisations. It also values systematic planning (which entails analysing situations, setting objectives, and crafting strategies), careful implementing (action plans), evaluating and monitoring (budgeting of resources).

To initiate students to become novice members of the marketing professional community, the Department of Marketing of the university in this study translates the core values and practices of marketing into an undergraduate programme of study. To enculturate (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991; Currie, 1993) students into this community, the department devises a variety of activities such as lectures, tutorials, internship, company visits and undertaking writing projects (including the tasks the two participants in this study did). To evaluate the extent to which students have been enculturated into this community, assessment criteria embodying these practices were devised. This forms the *institutional context* in which the two participants undertook their writing tasks.

The *local/immediate context* in which the participants occupied in undertaking their writing tasks can be classified into their *personal* and *interpersonal* domains.

Personal domain embraces the physical environment in which they undertook their writing tasks, their beliefs and knowledge about academic writing, their attitudes towards group work and assignments, and their workload. Interpersonal domain includes their interactions with group mates as well as their professors. It was found that both Joan and Susan were not aware of the more global contexts of the marketing discipline and the institution; instead, it was the factors in their local/immediate context that directly influenced their writing processes and learning experiences. This finding supports the points made by Casanave (1995), Chin (1994) and Prior (1991, 1995) that the local, immediate and interactive factors or the “microsociety” (Belcher & Braine, 1995: xxiv) that students inhabit have a more significant impact on their writing. It also corresponds with the findings from Ho, Chan, Sun and Yan’s (2004) study of students from a Hong Kong university. They found that students often had “little knowledge of the discipline and profession” (p.255). Their lack of knowledge of the marketing discipline resulted in their inability to draw on the disciplinary context as a resource to help them interpret their writing tasks (see implications for teaching in section 7.3).

The most significant finding relating to the participants’ immediate context is their interaction with group mates because this factor played an important role not only in their group writing but also their learning experiences. It was found that Joan was more successful in using her strategy to reap the benefits of group work (see findings to research question 5); however, Susan found it stressful working in a team, which made her dread group work (see findings to research question 4).

Research question 2: How do they interpret writing tasks?

The findings of this study suggest that *task representation* was an interpretative process that was set in motion when the participants tried to translate the task specifications or instructions into a series of actions that turned the given task into the final written product. The data show that *task representation* was the first and crucial process in accomplishing their writing tasks. It is crucial in that it determined how they set their direction, searched for the right information and organised the content. This interpretive process was found to be complex, multiple and often problematic. Since they

were never certain that a particular representation was accurate, they often kept re-evaluating their representations throughout the entire writing process. It was found that their representations were also subject to many influences from, for example, classmates, a word said by the lecturer in a lecture, and further information from the lecturer. This finding is generally consistent with what other researchers have found in their studies (e.g., Allen, 2004; Flower, 1990b).

Data from this research also reveal that different lecturers had different ways of encoding their task specifications, some of which were very detailed while some were fragmented and far from clear. This situation made the interpretive process complicated and confused. To come up with the written products that could best meet the lecturers' expectations and thus get the best possible grades, Joan and Susan employed the following means:

- Adhering to the assessment criteria or marking scheme (if given)
- Clarifying with and seeking information from other classmates
- Looking for hints during lectures
- Guessing the reader's expectations
- Consulting with lecturers

The last means "consulting with lecturers" was often used as a last resort because both Joan and Susan found it difficult to consult their lecturers after class and most consultations they managed to get were found to be not very helpful.

Research question 3: What are the sources they use and how do they use such sources in producing their writing tasks?

The findings revealed that they relied heavily on information obtained from the Web to accomplish their writing tasks. Although they mainly used figures from various web sites to support their arguments, occasionally they copied chunks of texts from the source materials without providing proper in-text referencing. There was no evidence from this study to suggest that they deliberately engaged in the potential act of plagiarism; rather, they seemed to lack (1) the English proficiency to paraphrase and synthesise source

texts, (2) the awareness of the conventions relating to using source texts in academic discourse, and (3) the feedback from teachers pointing out their inappropriate textual practice, which could amount to plagiarism in academic work. As Currie (1998) and Pennycook (1996) point out, the whole issue of plagiarism or “textual borrowing” is complex, especially for NNES students; penalty alone cannot tackle the issue.

In the process of *searching for and collecting information*, they spent a great deal of time using search engines such as Google to get the information they needed. It was found that the Web sites where they often sourced their information might not be as reliable and trustworthy as conventional sources such as books and peer-reviewed journals. However, the data suggested that both Joan and Susan were totally uncritical of the information provided by these Web sites. Also, the lack of feedback from teachers regarding this aspect could serve to reinforce their practice of writing from sources.

**Research question 4: Do they encounter any difficulties in their writing processes?
What are those difficulties?**

The findings show that they encountered a number of difficulties in their writing processes. These difficulties were primarily related to the areas of (1) application of theories/concepts, (2) readers’ expectations, (3) lexicogrammar, (4) skills of writing from sources, and (5) group work.

As the findings to the research question 1 show, marketing discipline emphasises application. Thus, the faculty and the department, in translating the practices of the discipline into a programme of study, emphasised the understanding and application of theories/concepts in their learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Both Joan and Susan, however, found it difficult to apply theories to solve problems or explain issues arising from given situations.

As shown in the findings to research question 2, knowing exactly what they were expected to write in terms of content and organisation was a daunting task to Joan and Susan. When they started to write (the *drafting* process), they found it difficult to

translate their ideas, mostly formed in their L1, into English mainly due to their lack of vocabulary and weak grammar. Their final written products were also weakened by their lack of skills in using information from source materials as evidence to build up convincing and cogent arguments.

It was found that almost 90% of their writing tasks were done in groups of three to six. The findings of this study show clearly that Susan (but not Joan), without any instructional support from the department, found it distressing and frustrating working with her group mates. Her problems mainly stemmed from the conflict and disagreement within the group, which were found to be caused by (1) leadership (who is in charge of the project?), (2) individual responsibility or commitment (such as participating in meetings and completing their parts in time), and (3) task allocation (who does what?). This supports the findings from Leki (2001) and Ho, Chan, Sun and Yan (2004). Leki (2001), in her study of the experiences of two NNES students in course-sponsored group projects, found that her participants had similar problems working in a group. In their investigation into university students' learning difficulties, Ho et al (2004) found that students encountered different degrees of difficulty in doing group projects, some of which such as leadership problems are similar to the findings in this study.

Research question 5: What strategies do they employ in accomplishing their writing tasks?

The results indicate that the participants employed eight strategies to cope with various difficulties they encountered in accomplishing their writing tasks. These strategies were devised in response to four main demands of their writing tasks: (1) group work, (2) task-related information (mainly content and structure of the paper), (3) workload and (4) vocabulary.

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, effective group work was essential in accomplishing the tasks on time but Susan experienced difficulties to harness the group dynamics resulting in her strong dislike of group work. By contrast, Joan was able to collaborate with her group mates in such a way that she enjoyed group work. This was

mainly due to her strategy of forming a group with her good friends. However, her carefully devised strategy had in a way defeated the institutional purpose of cultivating team work, i.e. the abilities to work with people (not just friends) in a team.

Their strategy of using an online translation dictionary to cope with the vocabulary demand of the tasks brings up the issue of using L1 in the writing processes. The results reveal that they used quite heavily their L1 mixed with some L2 in the planning/outlining process, in which they formulated and organised their ideas. This means that they had to go through a translation process to turn those ideas formulated in their L1 into English and they relied, to different degree, on an online dictionary to assist their translation. Previous studies of NNES students' writing process (e.g., Gosden, 1996; Li, 2007; Shaw, 1991) found similar situations of using the L1 at different stages of the process with mostly positive results. However, the findings in this study show that using an online dictionary was fraught with problems of correct usage of the new-found words in context as detailed in chapter 6.

7.2.3 Concluding remarks

Together with previous studies on second language writing, particularly academic writing in disciplinary courses (e.g., Allen, 2004; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 1995; Chin, 1994; Connor and Kramar, 1995; Currie, 1993; Faigley & Hansen, 1985; Horowitz, 1986; Lea & Street, 2000; Leki, 1995; Prior, 2004; Riazi, 1997; Tardy, 2004; Yang and Shi, 2003), this study has provided a detailed account of the processes the two NNES business undergraduates (participants in this study) at a Hong Kong university went through to accomplish their writing tasks in the contexts in which the writing took place. It has shown that writing in the marketing discipline is not “a strictly cognitive activity” (Leki, 2007:3) but, rather, entails multiple interpretations of given tasks and texts; interactions with group mates and professors; searching for and exchanging task-related information before production of texts. Studying these processes in the local contexts which students occupy allows teachers, especially EAP teachers, to better understand students' situated needs so that timely and appropriate assistance could be given. With the increasing number of NNES students from not only the secondary school

system but also from other institutions (such as community colleges and vocational institutes) entering English-medium universities in Hong Kong, they all have to cope with their studies and assignment writing in English. The contributions of situated studies of academic writing in higher education (such as the present study which adopted linguistic, cognitive and social perspectives) are significant in that they can add to our existing body of knowledge in this ever-expanding and increasingly complex area. Based on knowledge gained from research, EAP teachers can improve their practices to better address the needs of this large group of NNES students. In the following section, I will put forth some pedagogical implications of this study and suggest some ways to improve practice.

7.3 Implications for teaching

Although this case study was limited by its small sample size, I have followed the suggestions given in qualitative research and case study literature (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995) by providing enough description for readers to “assess the potential transferability, appropriateness for their own settings” (Miles & Huberman, 1994:279). Specifically, I have described as fully as possible the characteristics of the settings, the contexts and the participants so that readers should be able to “determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 2001:211).

This study has revealed that the participants encountered different degrees of difficulty at the prewriting and writing stages. To better help students cope with the writing demands in their discipline, I would put forward the following suggestions for teaching.

(1) The results of this study show that the prewriting stage was the dominant stage in the participants’ writing processes. Of all the five processes in this stage, task representation and information searching were found to be the most challenging. Task representation has at least two aspects: (a) the degree of explicitness of the task specifications, and (b)

students' knowledge of the disciplinary and institutional contexts in which the writing takes place.

For the first aspect, disciplinary course teachers should be aware of the common problems encountered by students during their interpretation process and, based on this awareness, construct the task specifications in such a way that their expectations can be more explicitly stated.

For the second aspect, EAP course developers and teachers may consider adopting the genre-based approach in which disciplinary writing is seen as embracing “both form and content” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995:4). The *form*, i.e. the use of language, and *content* occur in “a social context that conditions them” (Bizzell, 1982: 217). This study also shows that (a) the disciplinary and institutional contexts are part of the more global context (the outer circles as depicted in figure 4.1 in chapter 4) in which the participants' written assignments were read and assessed, and (b) the participants' lack of knowledge of the disciplinary context resulted in their inability to draw on it as a resource to interpret the tasks and produce the written assignments to best meet readers' expectations. In order to construct assignments that can demonstrate to their readers (disciplinary course teachers) an adequate knowledge of that discipline (Faigley & Hansen, 1985), students have to be aware of the expectations, in both form and content, of the disciplinary community into which they are being enculturated. Although this enculturation should best be done by the disciplinary course teachers, being members of that disciplinary community (Spack, 1988), EAP course developers and teachers, nonetheless, have the responsibility to help students better cope with the writing demands they will face beyond the EAP classrooms (Leki & Carson, 1994). As the findings of this study show, the participants' marketing subject lecturers never commented on the language aspect of their assignments. It would be almost impossible that they can learn the disciplinary writing skills from their content lecturers as suggested by Spack (1988). Furthermore, as Lea and Street's study reveals, content lecturers know what a good assignment is but “cannot describe how to write it” (2000:40). Thus, it seems that, as Hyland (2002a) suggests, EAP courses should be going in the direction of discipline-specific to better prepare students to

cope with the discipline-specific writing demands they face in universities. This would require materials and teaching methods that are underpinned by research (see the last section in this chapter for suggestions for future research).

(2) To help students use sources in their writing more effectively, the writing component of EAP courses should place more emphasis on writing from sources, especially the more critical use of Web sources. Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that EAP courses should cover the following areas:

1. information search skills, particularly using popular Internet search engines;
2. critical Internet literacy: raising students' awareness of being more critical in using Web sources as a research tool for academic purposes;
3. writing skills of synthesising information and ideas from sources to construct convincing and cogent arguments; and
4. paraphrasing and summarising skills to avoid copying chunks of text from Web sources.

As explained in the preceding paragraph, these skills would be more effectively acquired if they are taught and learned in a discipline-specific EAP course.

(3) The findings of this study clearly show that the participants had problems with using a dictionary to help them find the right words in translating their ideas formed in their L1 into English. The skills of using dictionaries (particularly monolingual dictionaries for advanced learners, collocation dictionaries and thesaurus) are often ignored in regular curricula in universities; however, such skills are essential to foster independent language learning. With the advent of the Internet and the development of online corpora, students should learn how to use a free online concordancer to check the common usage and collocations of a particular word. Adding this element to English courses can, to a certain extent, help them encode their ideas more accurately and correctly.

(4) This study also reveals that Susan had difficulties in collaborating with her group mates. Although Joan appeared to have worked very well with her group mates, the data

show that this was mainly due to her success in employing a strategy that in a way defeated the pedagogical purpose of group work (see section 6.3.2 in chapter 6). Susan may not be alone with her group work predicament. Without proper training on effective group work skills in the context of group projects for a particular discipline, teachers cannot assume that students can pick up these skills along the way. This is akin to teaching swimming by throwing learners into deep water; they would either survive or drown. The collaborative or cooperative aspect of group learning (Brophy, 2001) is sound in principle; however, it has to be grounded in proper training provided to students engaging in group work. To help students cope with the special demands of writing in a group situation, skill-based training covering the following skills is needed: (a) leadership, (b) team problem solving, (c) disagreement handling, and (d) project management. As reported in Ho et al's (2004) study, stand-alone courses of this type seems to be not as effective as support given to students while they are undertaking the discipline-specific writing projects.

(5) Both Joan and Susan found it difficult to apply theories and concepts embodied in their courses to solve problems or explain issues in a given situation. Since this is an important element of the programme, it seems that the disciplinary course teachers should consider their students' weaknesses in this area and make deeper learning such as conceptual understanding and theory applications more explicit in their teaching.

To conclude, in the 25 hours of interviews with the two student participants, only Susan mentioned once using something, for example "the use of thesis statement [in paragraph construction]; organisation of essay..." (Interview number 7), learned from their university EAP course in her disciplinary writing. This seems to imply that the EAP course they completed in their first year at university had little, if any, impact on their disciplinary writing. As discussed in chapter 6, the syllabus of this EAP course covered mainly general academic writing skills such as creating cohesive paragraphs, structuring an essay, summarising and paraphrasing source texts. The findings in this study show that the skills taught in the EAP course did not transfer well to their assignment writing in their disciplinary courses. This seems to indicate that they were not able to connect such

general skills with the actual academic writing they had to undertake in their discipline. A comment made by Joan in her last interview suggests that a general purpose EAP course did not serve her well:

“I think EAP writing [course] should make use of students’ assignments [in disciplinary courses] for practice and feedback. This is far more motivating and effective than asking us to write essays of some artificial topics for practice. We dislike writing such essays because we’ve already had our heavy workload; why not using our assignments [in disciplinary courses]...” (Interview number 16)

The findings in the present study support findings from previous research that general ESL or EAP courses are not effective in preparing students for their disciplinary writing tasks (see section 2.2.3 in chapter 2). I, therefore, suggest that EAP courses should be more discipline-specific, as advocated by Hyland (2002a), in order to improve students’ motivation and, more importantly, to prepare them for the writing they would encounter in their disciplinary courses. However, there can be potential practical difficulties in implementing this suggestion. Because of the differences in teaching philosophy and practice between the English department/language centre and the faculties, there can be difficulties in, for example, collaboration and team teaching (see, for example, Barron, 2002).

7.4 Limitations

Although this study has successfully answered its research questions, it faced three limitations. First, due to the participants’ reluctance to allow me to interview their lecturers/professors as pointed out in chapter 3 (section 3.7), I was not able to collect more information on readers’ expectations and their views on group work as assessment. To try to fill in this possible information gap, I managed to attend a workshop conducted by the university’s education development centre in 2006, where professors from different faculties, including those from the Marketing and Management Department, explored various issues relating to the assessment of group work. The information collected from this workshop was found to be useful in my data analysis and interpretation. On

reflection, however, data from interviewing the lecturers/professors, as members of the marketing community of practice, would have shed light on writing as a resource which they use to express their identities as members. This would help to demystify disciplinary expectations and thus could provide better assistance to students in their disciplinary writing. With hindsight, I should have pushed a little harder to convince the participants to allow me to conduct the interviews.

Second, the study was also limited by not being able to observe some of the participants' lectures because they expressed that they would feel uneasy when they were being observed during lectures (see chapter 3). As the study progressed, I found that the rich store of data I gathered from other sources was able to offset this limitation.

Third, the study was also limited by the frequency of access I had to each participant. I would like to have had more frequent interviews with them while they were engaging in their writing processes; however, this was not always possible because of their busy schedule and heavy workload. On reflection, the 25 hours of interviews with the two participants have already provided me with the data needed to address the research questions.

7.5 Suggestions for future research

The results of this study support findings of previous similar studies that disciplinary writing is complex and situated in particular contexts. It is one of the important activities in the academic lives of students in that it does not only form part of the assessments but also part of the enculturation process through which students are being initiated into a particular disciplinary or professional community. To add to the body of knowledge in the areas of academic and professional writing in undergraduate settings, more situated studies are needed. The following are my suggestions for further research.

First, more ethnographic-oriented research that includes observations of students' classes/lectures and group work operations can allow us to see the subtle interactions between (1) students and professors during lectures, and (2) students and students in a group situation. These extra dimensions of data collection can add to the depth of the study in terms of students' local and immediate context, which was found to have the biggest impact on students' writing processes in the present study.

Second, similar studies situated in students' disciplinary contexts can also be extended to other disciplines such as engineering, accounting, and social sciences. Findings from such studies would contribute "to a greater demystification of the disciplinary expectations" (Currie, 1993:113) and thus to designing and delivering more effective writing courses for students from various disciplines in universities.

Finally, as discussed in section 7.3, if EAP courses are heading towards becoming more discipline-specific, research has to be carried out in the major disciplines of universities to find out their respective disciplinary conventions and communicative practices. Specifically, researchers have to negotiate access to the disciplinary departments to conduct interviews with professors, collect samples of students' written assignments and conduct genre analysis on published articles of professionals/academics in the discipline. The purposes are to find out (1) their discursive practices and conventions, (2) the written genres commonly used in the disciplinary community, and (3) their expectations of students' written work. With this understanding of particular disciplinary communities through research, EAP course developers and teachers would be in a better position to design and teach discipline-specific academic writing courses to students of particular disciplines. As Silva (1990:20) argues, practices and approaches of teaching L2 writing have to be "grounded in appropriate and adequate theory and credible research". To enhance the professionalism of EAP teachers in higher education, it is important that our teaching, from material design to teaching approaches, has to be underpinned by credible research.

APPENDIX A

LEICESTER UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

INFORMATION

You are invited to participate in an educational research study which is to fulfill part of the requirement for the researcher's EdD degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the writing process and practices of Hong Kong undergraduate business students and, in particular, to find out how they cope with the writing demands.

The study will involve filling out a questionnaire, keeping a diary, and attending interviews. They are concerned with finding out your personal background, language learning experience, reading and writing experience, and your conceptions and processes in writing assignments in university. The questionnaire and the format of the diary will be given to you in due course. The interviews, each of which may take about one hour, will be conducted in Cantonese and will be tape-recorded with your permission. With your permission, the researcher will also make copies of your written assignments, both drafts and papers with feedback from your lecturers/tutors, and other materials related to your reading and writing processes.

BENEFITS

The process and the findings of the study will help you better understand your own reading and writing processes in English in an academic context. The findings will also contribute to better understanding of how Hong Kong undergraduate business students go about completing different written assignments as part of their course requirements. This increased understanding may help language educators in university to design more effective English for academic writing programmes.

CONFIDENTIALITY and ANONYMITY

The information provided by you in whatever formats will be stored securely and kept confidential. No one except the researcher will have access to the information. Your real name will not be mentioned and no reference which could link you to this study will be made in any reports, oral or written. At the end of this study, all the records including audio tapes, diaries, papers and other related materials collected from you may be erased or returned to you at your request. If you do not so request, the researcher will keep them in a secure place and only the researcher will be able to access them for any further related scholarly use. In any circumstances, your identity will be protected.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is **voluntary**; you are not obliged to participate. You may withdraw from this study at any time. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, all data collected from you will either be destroyed or returned to you at your request. If you do not so request, the researcher will keep them in a secure place and only the researcher will be able to access them for any further related scholarly use.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

I. Personal Background

1. Name: _____ (Your real name will not be used in any reports related to this study)
2. Gender: Female/male
3. Programme of study at [name of university] (e.g. BA(Hons) Marketing):

4. Year of study at [name of university] (e.g. year 1/2/3): _____
5. Language(s) you speak most at home: Cantonese/ others _____ (circle one)
6. Language(s) you speak most and with friends/classmates: Cantonese/ others _____ (circle one)
7. Years learning English: _____ years. Starting to learn English in: Kindergarten/ Primary school/ Secondary school/ others _____ (circle one)
8. Medium of instruction in secondary school: English/ Chinese (circle one)
9. Medium of instruction in post-secondary school: English/ Chinese (circle one)
10. Highest grade obtained in the Use of English examination (if you have taken one):
_____ Year of the examination: _____
11. Highest grade obtained in English language in HKCEE: _____
Syllabus: A/ B (circle one) Year of the examination: _____

II. Self-evaluation of English proficiency and writing for academic purposes

1. How do you rate your overall proficiency in English? (Circle one)

Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor
2. How do you rate your proficiency in the four skills of English as listed below: (Circle one for each skill)?

Reading:	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Listening:	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Writing:	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Speaking:	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor

3. Which skill of English (reading, listening, writing and speaking) is the most difficult for you to master? Please order the four skills from the most difficult to the least difficult.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____
Most difficult → *Least difficult*

Please list and describe the reasons why you think a particular skill is the most difficult for you to master.

4. Which skill of English listed below is the **most important** skill that is essential for you to complete your degree programme with the result you want. (Circle one)

Reading: (e.g. textbooks, handouts, reference materials etc.)

Listening: (e.g. lectures and tutorials)

Writing: (e.g. assignments, term papers, project reports and exam papers)

Speaking: (e.g. making oral presentations, and asking questions in tutorials, lectures or seminars)

Please list and describe the reasons why you think a particular skill is the most important one.

5. Have you ever taken any English courses that teach you write for academic purposes?
Yes/ No

If yes, please list below (a) name of the course, (b) duration of the course, (c) when you took the course, and (d) where you took the course

6. How do you distinguish a good piece of academic writing from a poor one?
(for example, the content, the style, the grammar, the vocabulary etc.)

7. Please describe the main difficulties you have encountered in English writing in your degree study (e.g. writing assignments, term papers, project reports and exam papers).

End of questionnaire. Thank you very much for your time.

APPENDIX C

Sample of diary entries

Note: This is a translated version of the diary entries; the original entries were written mainly in Chinese with some phrases in English

Date and time	Activities and purpose(s)	Comments
5 Nov (Sat) 5:00 to 6:00	Think of an outline [for the report] To clarify and make sure of the right direction	Simply don't know how to start! The only thing I can do is to analyse ah sir's [the teacher] marking scheme to look for the rundown!
After dinner	Info search To know more about the lighting industry + [name of the company]	Found a lot of info but I can't print them out to read, so it's very tiring to read [on screen]
	Sent email to team mate To frame questions	Only 2 team mates replied. DEPRESSING!
	Call the director of [name of company] to make appointment for an interview	Good → Monday 4 pm
	Call team mates to find out how many of them will go to the interview	DEPRESSING! Only one is available!
6 Nov (Sun) after lunch	Reading textbook to know more about concept and theory	Seems to have some direction → keep reading → need to think of how to work out demand + screening → it's a headache because I missed that lesson → at a loss!
7 Nov (Mon) morning	Read info + reading To start to do it	Very sleepy!
	Re-organize questions collected to prepare for the interview	Have a set of questions at last!
2:30	Lunch with C [a group mate] to prepare for the interview	The discussion helps us to come up with the questions
4:00	Interview A [name of the company director] to get primary info for the project	Happy! Understand more! Feel good!
8 Nov 4:00 pm	Meeting [with group mates] to divide up work and search for info	3 men [to work on] EU 3 women [to work on] USA

APPENDIX D

Sample of interview notes (codes are in square brackets and recording time marks are in round brackets)

Extracted from Interview number 13

Joan's (pseudonym) interview notes [Date of interview: 9 Dec 2005] – recorded (file: interview 3)

I heard from my friends that there are 2A-, 2B+, 1C+, and the rest are B. I'm in the middle tier, which I feel that it's OK. As long as I'm not at the bottom rank, I'll feel OK. Although I've spent a lot of time in this assignment, the B grade I think is justified because there are many other able students in my class.

I've glanced through the comments written by Paul. It's OK. Some of the words he wrote are illegible to me. The comments on the shipping costs are not really accurate because from what my father told me shipping costs are based on size of the goods not the weight, so how heavy is the furniture doesn't affect the final price. [LOCAL CONTEXTS: IPF] The fact that we didn't include the cover and content page could possibly affect our final grade in terms of 'overall presentation of report' as specified in the marking key given. In the past we relied on S to do this, but this time round all 3 of us have overlooked this. [LOCAL CONTEXTS: ABW] (5m20s)

I feel that Paul is a conscientious teacher who gave us rather detail feedback. And I feel that I can learn to see things from a wider perspective from his feedback. [LOCAL CONTEXTS: IPF] But it's always the case that when we completed the assignment, we think it's OK. But when we have the feedback there are always something missing. And it's kind of not fair because we couldn't get the information we want even though we knew we should have it [SOURCES: TIF]. (9m5s)

[Referring to p.4 of assignment] We should have deleted the superscripts but we didn't do it because we were in a hurry. Originally we intended to include some information in the footnotes, but time didn't allow us to do so. The last comment on this page "You're not competing with manufacturers but with products" is something I don't understand what he's trying to say [LOCAL CONTEXTS: IPF]

[Referring to p.5 of assignment] I don't agree with the comments "I think a fairer comparison would have been Belgium versus California not USA" because Belgium is a country which can't be compared with a state. [LOCAL CONTEXTS: IPF]

[Referring to p.6 of assignment] I don't quite understand what he's trying to say. On reflection we should have described at the very beginning of the paper how the business in California should be run. We have missed this part.

The only male team mate had no contribution at all in this and other assignments (the issue discussion which he was supposed to work with the other 2 girls); he is a real free rider. (19m25s) [LOCAL CONTEXTS: IGM]

...

APPENDIX E

Coding scheme of immediate/local contexts

Categories	Codes (abbreviations) with brief description
Personal domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical environment (PEN) - the time and places where the reading & writing took place• Beliefs and knowledge about academic writing (ABW)• Learning from group work (ALW) - participants' perceptions on learning in group work environment• Attitude towards group work (AGW) - participants' attitude towards writing in group• Attitude towards assignment writing (AAW) - participants' objectives of & perceptions on assignment writing• Workload (WKL)
Interpersonal domain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interactions with group mates (IGM) - the manner in which they interact with their group mates to tackle the tasks• Interactions with professors (IPF) - the communications that took place outside classrooms which include consultation & written feedback

Coding scheme of writing processes

Categories	Codes (Abbreviations)
Writing processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Task representation (TRP)• Setting direction (SDR)• Task allocation (TAL)• Searching for and collecting information (SCI)• Planning/Outlining (PLN)• Drafting (DRF)• Collecting and integrating parts (CIP)• Proofreading (PFR)• Final checking (FCH)

Categories	Codes (Abbreviations)
Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textbook (TXB) • Web (WEB) • Lecture notes (LCN) • Teacher's information (TIF) • Marking scheme (MKS) • Language issues (CET) • Textual borrowing (CPY)
Difficulties encountered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying theories or concepts (THO) • Understanding task specifications (TSP) • Grammar and vocabulary (GVO) • Finding the right information (INF) • Presenting information from source texts (PIN) • Working with group mates (WGM)
Coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dividing up work and collaborating with group mates (DUW) • Choosing the right group mates (CGM) • Seeking information from more able classmates (CLM) • Exchanging information with other classmates (ECM) • Guessing reader's expectation (GRE) • Relying on assessment criteria (ACR) • Skipping classes (SCL) • Using online dictionary (DIC)

APPENDIX F

Sample of analytic memo

Sem 2, 2004/2005 Subject: Distribution Management

MEMO 4.4.05

A great deal of guess work on task representation [TPR] and reader's expectation [GRE]. Her strategy of tackling language problem from Chinese media sources was to look for similar news items from English media sources in the library electronic archives. She often paused for TV watching [LOCAL CONTEXTS: PEN]. She struggled to write the introduction and finally gave up writing this first because "I don't really know what I'm going to write in the whole report because I think intro needs to include summary of the report..." The "News Summary" seemed to be easy because "mostly copying from news reports" and "with copying from web sites and adding a little bit [of my own ideas] made "Company background" also easy. [SOURCES: CPY]

Her main difficulties are: using her own words and grammatically accurate sentences to write her points – "Coming up with points is not difficult but writing is" [DIFFICULTIES: GVO]. She sought help from her boy friend who proofread her work.

She didn't like to do individual written assignment because "I'm very worried about whether I've the points right". [LOCAL CONTEXTS: AGW]

Copying from sources seems to be her writing practice [SOURCES: CPY]. EAP seems to have no effect on 'referencing skills'.

Note: Words in square brackets are the initial codes.

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